AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine

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ADC55

P.05 What would you do with an extra twenty years?

P.19 In a breakup, what's mine, what's yours, and what's ours?

P.40 Can one meet societal norms but stay true to their own values?

P.61 Who does cheating hurt, if nobody knows?

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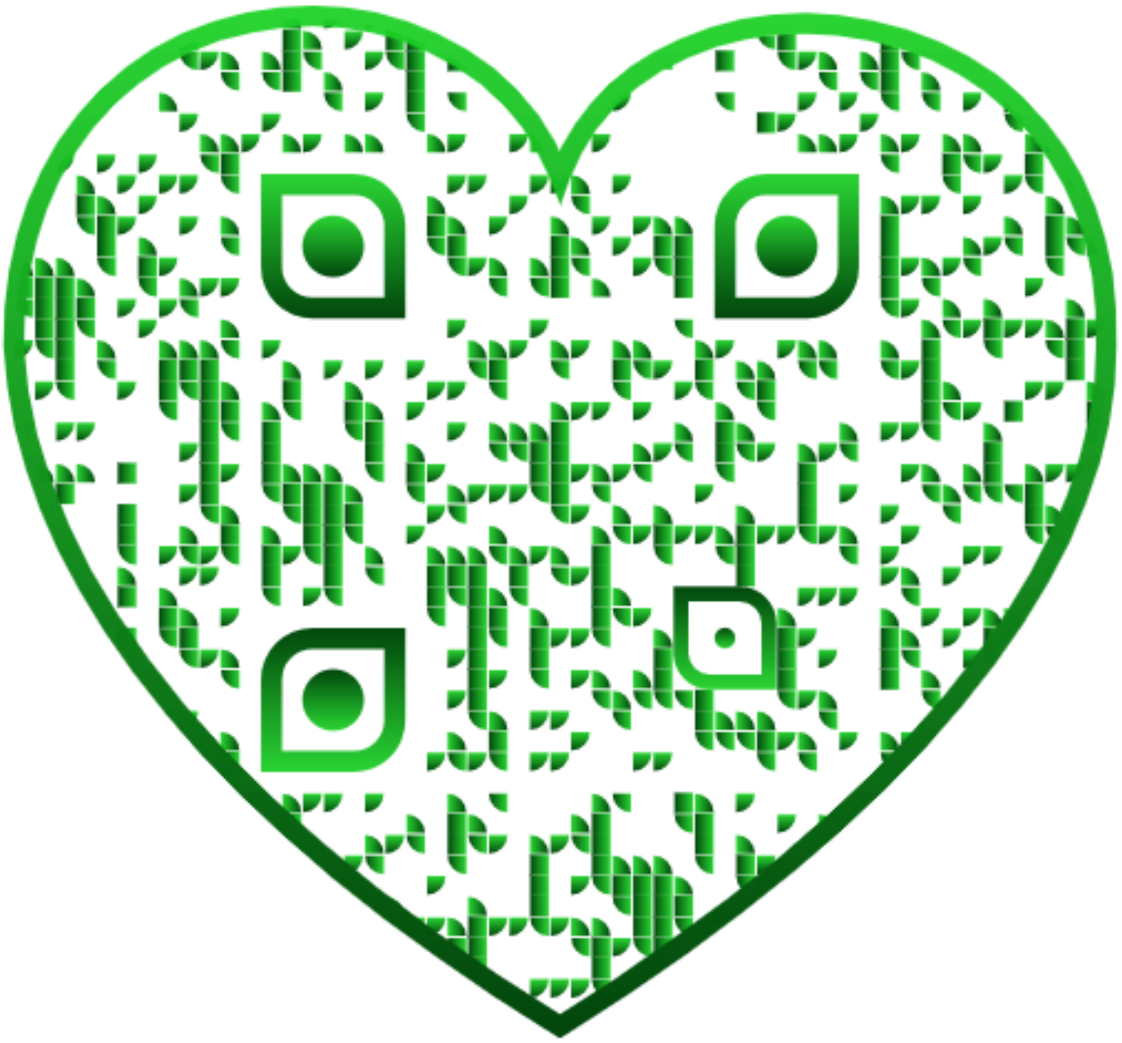

After Dinner Conversation Magazine – January 2025

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

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After Dinner Conversation *is an independent nonprofit publisher. We believe in fostering meaningful discussions among friends, family, and students to enhance humanity through truth-seeking, reflection, and respectful debate. To achieve this, we publish philosophical and ethical short story fiction accompanied by discussion questions.*

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From the Editor

I recently rewatched the first *Matrix* movie. When Neo goes to visit the Oracle, she says to him, "Being the One is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love, you just know it, through and through, balls to bones."

A "knowing" is something we are so sure of it is axiomatic; it is beyond data and beyond reflection. It is self-stating and self-answering. It *is*. For example, I love my wife.

One of the ones I have recently added to my list is, "This literary magazine is one of the best and most important being produced today." We have won no awards and perhaps never will. But I am now sure this is a reflection on the awards and not on us. This isn't a goal or an affirmation. It *is*.

Of course, I have other "knowings" as well, which, taken together, make up my soul. (1) Always try and do good, even if it is not in your best interest to do so. (2) Speak well, or at least empathetically, of others. (3) The world is knowable. (4) Diversity is a strength. I could go on, but you get the idea.

The point is, as you read through these stories, I would encourage you to use them as a tool to reflect on, and maybe even write down, your own "knowings" that make up your soul. What are the things you are so sure of that they are beyond reflection or doubt? And what, if anything, might you want to add to your list? Happy reading.

Kolby Granville – Editor

Present in Time

Cliff Aliperti

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Language

* * *

"Today's the day," my father said, setting a meticulously wrapped, perfectly square box in front of me.

The box gleamed under silver wrapping paper, its edges crisped, corners sharp. Red ribbon bundled it tight, intersecting in perfect right angles. A shiny red bow matched the ribbon atop the box.

"It's not my birthday," I said, pushing the too-perfect thing inches away from me with the tips of two fingers.

"You may not think so, Mick, but it kind of is," Dad said.

He stood silently staring at me, biting down on his bottom lip but not hard enough to contain the wide smile dimpling his cheeks.

"Well?" he said. "Aren't you going to open it?"

I sighed and then peeled the bow off the top of the box.

"You know, I have things to do," I said, knowing how

bitchy this sounded, but I truly didn't have time today to be interrupted by Dad's weirdness.

Things to do at that moment was simply scrolling through emails on my phone, but this was just a brief respite before preparing Dad's dinner. Okay, our dinner, but still! Anyway, before I'd glued my eyes to my phone, I'd been talking on it, doing my best to remain calm with the rep at Dad's insurance company while trying to switch his primary care physician because his old doctor, truly old, had recently died. I had failed and would need to call back tomorrow. After, I had just needed a goddamned moment, and now this… this…

"That's kind of the point," he said, still smiling, some sweat beading from his brow. Like it was hard work to give me a gift. "Go on. Open up."

I slid my fingers under the ribbon and the Scotch tape holding it in place popped, the ribbon cascading down all four sides of the box at once, which I know it's silly, caused me to think of synchronized swimmers at the Olympics. I found the seam on the wrapping paper, shimmied my finger under it, and unwrapped.

It was a plain brown corrugated cardboard box. No company logo beyond that of the box manufacturing company on the bottom.

Dad started swirling his hand around like, *c'mon*, until he had to withdraw his hand to respond to a sudden coughing fit. I shrugged and tore the tape off the top of the box, lifted the flaps, and looked inside.

I wasn't happy. I felt a swelling in my skull and felt like I was looking down on myself just to see that ever-more-prominent blue vein in my forehead pulsating.

"An empty box? Hah hah?"

My father laughed for real. At me. "No, not empty. It's what you've always wanted. What you want right now. It's the greatest gift I could bestow, especially now, when I have no use of it."

"Dad, are you all right?"

"It's twenty years," he said, suddenly gasping for breath. He leaned all of his weight onto his left arm, now bracing himself on the table. His voice, softer. "Well, probably not exactly twenty, but within a few days of that. Maybe weeks. Twenty years."

"Twenty years of what?" I asked.

"Twenty years," he said, a little miffed I wasn't getting it. "Oh, they're not my best twenty, but still of use. Enjoy them."

Dad dropped to the floor in a heap. Dead.

* * *

Dad had been buried just over six months when I moved beyond the robotic motions of zombie commuter who got through work on pure instinct, to regaining my bearings and getting on with life again. Thought returned. Feeling. I worked, came home, cooked myself dinner, and moved beyond vegging in front of the TV to being able to concentrate well enough to read. I was coming along.

I hadn't thought of the box during those months of mourning, but somehow through my tears and misery, it was still there in a corner of the very room where it had been presented to me. I noticed it one night, flaps still splayed open, and thought someone may as well have sketched an eye on the panel facing me. Damn thing had me in its sights.

I approached the box, picked it up, stared inside. Still

empty. I shook my head.

The doctor said it was a stroke that took Dad. Massive and sudden. I asked if maybe he might have found himself acting funny before the stroke hit, and the doctor asked what kind of funny. “Oh, you know, like saying strange things,” I said, not specifying. Not daring to mention the box.

That was a possibility, the doctor granted, but I didn’t offer any additional details and let the matter of Dad’s box drop. A deluded final gesture, I concluded.

But what if?

What if the old man had actually had another twenty years to go, but decided I could make better use of them? There was nothing I moaned and groaned about more than time, more with every passing year, and the days just seemed to evaporate before I could ever get anything done. Sure, I was alone in the house, cooking and caring for one now with my newfound spare hours, so maybe the box was, I don’t know, some sort of symbol or portent predicting Dad’s stroke. Like, I’ll be going now, so here’s all the time you would have spent on me and with me—make good use of it.

But what if—what if it were possible—my father had really gifted me pure time. The time I could never find on my own?

* * *

So I tried living hard. Don’t worry, at fifty I wasn’t going to go too wild. For me, living hard just meant using those spare minutes that had opened up. Sure, I still had to pay the bills, shop for groceries, cook my meals, get to work, but suddenly I also had time to walk two miles a day, chat on social media, scribble some notes toward a possible story, catch up on my

shows, even go to a couple of ballgames and one play.

And when everything went right and I had had a nice day, I made sure in the evening to take a deep breath and say aloud, "I've had a nice day," or "This has been a nice day," or "What a pleasant perfect day." I thought it completely reasonable to believe this was how single men survived to arrive at each tomorrow. Which usually wasn't as nice as yesterday. In other words, I needed to get out more, meet somebody.

I was going through the motions and I knew it. Oh, I was over Dad, at least as over him as I was ever going to be. Clarity had returned, there was no doubting that. I was clear enough to realize I filled my empty hours with empty occupations designed only to tick time away, time I now had in spades. I was on a treadmill (maybe I should buy a treadmill?), and while I was getting done what needed to be done, something was missing.

Twenty extra years of emptiness? I didn't need that.

The clincher came when I was out one day and ran into Bob, an old pal from high school.

"Jesus, Mick, you okay?"

"Yeah. What's up, Bob?"

"You look, I don't know. Pale? Pallid?"

I went home and stared into Dad's box. I brought it up to my face and inhaled its emptiness. I stuck out the tip of my tongue and tapped it against an inside edge. I felt nothing. Smelled nothing. Tasted nothing. The box still seemed empty.

I taped the box up, hoping this would seal away those extra years. Didn't want them; didn't need them. If they really existed, they only seemed to award monotony. I don't know how I expected to know if this tactic was going to work or not. You're never really aware of extra time until it has passed.

Maybe if I suddenly found myself scrambling to get through all of the tasks in my day, I could say this worked, keep the box sealed. Bury it out back maybe. I shook my head, wondering how my father could have been so wrong about this so-called gift.

Only then did I realize, knowing my old man, he had probably come to the same conclusion that I had—this damn box gifted the wrong twenty years! If anything, it had added on twenty years I really didn't need, while what I wanted, even craved, was to recapture twenty years from a fondly remembered past.

We didn't want more of what was coming, we wanted to go back to what we had.

My father had played a damn dirty trick on me!

* * *

The box remained on the shelf taped up for a few days before I realized I had caught some kind of bug. I thought it was just a little head cold at first, but on the third day of feeling off, I could barely drag myself out of bed to call in sick to the office. I took my temperature—102—and knew I should make a doctor's appointment, but that would involve getting dressed and dragging my carcass out of the house and to the doctor's office. Wasn't happening.

Night sweats came along with sleep interrupted by coughing fits that brought up thick sputum from my lungs. I figured I had pneumonia. I figured a lot of strange things over the next several hours as I waited for daylight and resisted calling myself an ambulance. What I was really wondering, where my fever brain had concentrated its faltering energy, was about the box. Where had it come from? What were its rules?

Like did the box gift each recipient twenty years? Or was twenty years only what it had left when Dad gifted it to me? I wish I'd thought to ask him what he started out with—twenty, like he gave me, or was it thirty or forty that he'd worn down to the twenty before deciding it was time to give the box away. Where had Dad found the box? Had someone given him the box, and if the box had started out with more than twenty years, how many more? Did the box date to ancient times? Had some pharaoh gifted it to his entitled son? Was it of alien origin? Was it perhaps a gift some outer space visitors had bestowed on some primitive hunter-gatherer?

"Moron," I said aloud through my raspy voice. "They wouldn't have had corrugated cardboard in ancient times, and aliens surely would have thought of something better."

By this time, I had somehow crawled out of bed. What must have been an eight-ounce bead of sweat dripped from my brow to stain the top of the box, which was somehow clutched tightly between my two hands.

I tore the tape open. I inhaled like I was huffing gas, or, a more recent milestone, sucking at a Primatene Mist. I passed out.

And I felt pretty damn good by the time the sunlight baked my eyes open. I sprung up, healthy.

I believed in the box.

* * *

"Now," I said to myself, as though I were some comic book hero or perhaps villain, "I wonder who could really make use of these years."

Because here's the thing—the box was magic; yes, I was buying into the box's power by then. Dad had really tried to

bestow me a wonderful gift. Problem was, what the box gave me, I didn't need. More of what I already had? No, the twenty I wanted, I had already lived. Fully. This box, even if I was deluded and it was just an empty box, made me obsess over time. Remember when you were in school, staring at the clock every thirty seconds, praying for math class to end? Or at work, wondering how in the hell it's still two hours till lunch? And then an hour-fifty-five, etcetera? I was clock-watching my entire life into a dull endless vacuum of emptiness. Like the box. Maybe. Or maybe not: I decided I had to pass the box on to someone who could make better use of these added years because, as I mentioned, I had begun to believe more than doubt.

I lit up when seeing one of those TV commercials that asked for seventeen dollars a month to help save sick children. There they were on my television, asking for help. Worthy of my help. They were my answer!

"It would be the humanitarian thing to do," I said because now that I lived alone, I talked to myself. A lot.

But humanitarian thing or not, how was I, an admittedly somewhat strange single male, going to approach an ill child to gift them with the box? Even if I didn't come across as creepy enough to be immediately reported to the police, the kid's eventual disappointment at opening what *appeared* to be an empty box would likely lead to that police report, possibly even a straitjacket.

Twenty extra years pounding on a padded cell for *moi*.

I considered mailing the box to wherever one would send their seventeen-dollar check to aid the children, but even if I could locate a mailing address—they all wanted credit card numbers immediately typed into your keyboard or phone

pad—the box would certainly be opened by some adult before passing into any child's hands. Rightly so, I understood that. A lot of sickos out there, but I didn't want to bestow my father's quote-unquote gift on some anonymous intermediary working in a mailroom that I couldn't find anyway.

I had the misfortune of not knowing any unfortunates. Excepting myself. Unfortunately.

I thought perhaps I could stalk the local neighborhood and track down somebody with a sick child, make friends with the parent, get myself invited over, and eventually present my gift. It'd be nice to have somebody cook me a meal for a change, like a roast, something substantial. It'd been years. I shook my head to manually wipe this thought away; this wasn't about my stomach, it was a goddamn humanitarian act I was looking to impart. This plan was a long-term plan and would likely use up a few years, whether my own or the box's, to execute. And the parents' reaction to my gifting their dying child an empty box wasn't likely to be any big dinner but a punch in the nose, at best.

As luck would have it, my great-aunt phoned to ask if enough time had passed to have a talk about my father.

"Sure, what's up?" I asked.

I proceeded not to listen. It was like hearing static interrupted by phrases that occasionally piqued my interest: "… your mother… Philadelphia… charges dismissed… Reverend Bailey… cremated…" I imagined this was how the old lady's dog would listen to her. Just select and respond to the key words, but there was a set of words Aunt Louise had not said.

"Do you know about the box?" I finally broke through and asked after she had come up for breath.

"Box?"

"Never mind."

Aunt Louise chattered on endlessly ("… 1985… Uncle Herb… distant… wife… self-harm…"), though by the end of the conversation I saw only eight minutes had passed. So much for the gift of time.

Still, our conversation had offered a revelation—my second cousin Stewie, who lived out of state and hadn't bothered attending Dad's funeral, was blessed with an ill child. This I listened to, caught all the words. Cancer! Perfect!

I asked Aunt Louise if she had Stewie's address and, sure enough, she provided me with the information and also confirmed that this grown man, a few years older than I was, still went by Stewie.

"You think Stewie will remember me?" I asked.

"Oh, sure," Aunt Louise said. "You two and his sister Celia used to play together all the time at the family get-togethers. I remember one Christmas, you three put on such a cute little Nativity play, costumes and all…"

I couldn't really give a damn about Stewie, never mind Celia, still a pair of little assholes in my memory, so any punch in the nose at the end of this rainbow might even be worth the laugh. And Stewie's little brat, whether actual brat or ill little angel, deserved Dad's years, no matter the cost. It wasn't his fault his father hogged all the best toys, or his Aunt Celia forced me to play the goat in that damn Christmas play when we were in grade school. This plan certainly seemed worth risking familial discord where there was currently only distance punctuated by something between indifference and ambivalence.

"Do you think, Aunt Louise, that Stewie would be okay with my sending his son something? A little gift?"

"Why sure, they'd love that!" Aunt Louise said.

* * *

I took extra Vitamin C, exercised, and ate healthier than usual for a few days, anticipating trouble once I resealed the box. I called my job and was pleased my boss was willing to grant me my vacation days without any notice. What I had hoped was that I'd only fall ill for a few days until the box was successfully passed on, but having experienced Dad's giving of the gift, this was a narrow hope. Still, maybe Dad had already been ill, and if my one hypothesis about the box recharging to twenty years every time it was gifted was correct, then I would have a chance. I tried to be optimistic in thinking Dad had used his twenty, knew he was a goner at the end of that rainbow, and wanted to be sure to give me my own chance at twenty extra. Now I would do the same for Stewie Jr., but since I was otherwise healthy, I wouldn't drop dead the moment the boy opened up.

This was one way to think about it.

I found some leftover wrapping paper from Dad's last birthday and suppressed a cough as I wrapped up the now-sealed box in paper featuring geriatric cats looking miserable in party hats. I tried to put as much care and skill into the job as Dad had. Of course, I fell short. When I creased my edges, there seemed to be an air pocket under the wrapping paper on every side of my imperfect cube. It would have to do. It was very hard to concentrate on the task at hand through all of my coughing and sneezing. I packaged my wrapped box within another box so I could include a card. I wrote "For Stewie Jr.'s eyes only" on the envelope, hoping cousin Stewie trusted me enough to allow his son to open the card and package on his own. The last thing I wanted was to be responsible for unleashing an extra twenty

years of Stewie senior on the world.

I made several drafts of the text I wrote inside the card. I needed my message to be specific, but not disturbing. I settled on:

Stewie Jr., my father made me a present of this box. It is the gift of years. With love from cousin Mick.

I addressed the box, posted it, mailed it. By the time I returned from the post office, I crawled straight into bed and pulled the covers over my shivering body.

I tossed and turned, taking sleep where I could grab it. At one point, I turned on the TV and streamed a Bob Ross marathon to help lull me off. I was burning up and in and out of consciousness.

I had begun to think about this thing in the other way. I had miscalculated and was a dead man walking as I awaited the opening of my gift. In my haste to be rid of this misguided gift, I had basically committed suicide. No, that hadn't been my intention. It'd be more accurate to say, I thought I'd gone for a shave but had ignorantly bared my throat for a killer's blade.

I reached into my nightstand for my journal and a pen and did my best to record my interactions with the box. After all, if my one supposition turned out correct, and this box had been around for millennia, perhaps for all of time, then maybe my experience could help somebody else.

If you're that somebody, my advice: refuse the gift.

I had entrusted the box with the US mail. This is day three. Priority package, it really ought to get there soon.

I'm almost done writing now. Nothing much more to tell. If there were, no strength to tell it.

I await the unwrapping.

I guess I really knew from the beginning.
That this would be my end.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Are there ways you might test if the box really did, or did not, give the gift of time? Does it matter if the box is a hoax if the keeper of the box believes the box of time is real?
2. Are there times when you feel like you are watching the clock in the classroom of your life slowly tick by? What is it about the way we are using our time that makes it seem like we have enough or not enough?
3. If you knew you had an extra healthy twenty years, what (*if anything*) would you change about the way you are living today?
4. If you were given the extra time, would you keep it or give it away? If you gave it away, how would you decide who to give it away to and why?
5. Do you think humans, on average, live too long, too short, or just the right amount of time? What is the basis of your opinion? If we lived, on average, thirty years or one hundred fifty years, how would humanity be different?

* * *

On Ice

Laura Mullen

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

* * *

Jacob keeps calling. The phone buzzes at inconvenient times, interrupting my morning meditation, a call with my therapist, my weekly team meeting. I silence the calls, but his name threads through my mind, interrupting my train of thought, demanding attention.

Please answer. We need to talk.

The text messages pile up as well, though I have muted notifications on his missives, protecting me from the onslaught. Dr. Novali notices my eyes darting to the screen midway through our Wednesday session, my voice catching mid-story, derailing me. She looks at the phone but doesn't ask.

"Jacob," I offer. The name is heavy with history and innuendo, and Dr. Novali raises her eyebrows.

"Have you been talking to Jacob again?"

I haven't, I assure her, and I try not to read into her tone.

Jacob has only recently stopped being the main character in my therapy sessions. I assume Dr. Novali is not eager to resurrect the topic of our failed relationship.

Before bed I scroll through dating apps on my phone, rereading long message chains I have started and abandoned with men I avoid meeting in real life. Dr. Novali says my engagement on these platforms counts as self-care, and so I swipe right and left, respond to direct messages, pretend I am interested in future moments. When Jacob calls, I am startled. Jacob's familiar face—his smile, his stubble—displaces the profile of the man I had been considering (Brandon: he likes boats and beer). I throw the phone across the bed, panicked.

"CeCe?" His voice is muffled, and I realize I have inadvertently answered the phone. I crawl from beneath the covers to retrieve it, planning to hang up, but I hear his voice. "Don't hang up."

His voice. His voice. Deep and throaty, as familiar as the voice of my mother, as distinct as any I have heard. He should record audiobooks, do voice-overs or movies or radio shows. Even two years later, his voice is intoxicating. I lift the phone to my ear, thirsty for more, but say nothing.

"CeCe, can you hear me? I don't know if you can hear me." I imagine him pulling the phone away to confirm the timer on the call is still going. I open my mouth to speak but find I cannot. "CeCe, we should talk. I think we should talk. I don't know if you got the letter from Coastal, but if you did, you need to read it. We need to make some decisions, and I have a question for you."

Still, I say nothing. I did get the letter. It was a bill, actually, accompanied by a letter. When it arrived, I set it aside, a

problem for another day. It wasn't the money. Six hundred dollars wouldn't break the bank, though when I paid it each year, I wondered why I was continuing to do so, whether Jacob even knew I did. It was illogical to preserve these embryos for a future that wasn't coming.

"I got it," I say, and I hear him exhale.

"You're there. Hi. Thanks for answering."

"Hi." My voice is higher than I intend, and I realize I haven't spoken in several hours. I am surprised he receives the bills or the letters from Coastal Fertility. I wonder when he called them to update his address. The embryos are half his, I suppose, though I alone have funded them.

"How are you?"

I contemplate responses to this question. I am well. I was recently promoted at work. I am in therapy. I have morning rituals I follow with the devout rigor of a religious convert. I have my friends, my work, and my nephews nearby. I am well. If I tell him I am well he will be relieved to know he did not break me. I say nothing.

He allows a long moment to pass before he speaks. "You sound good. I'm good too. I'm back in Syracuse, you know." I do know. I ran into Mitchell—once our friend, now Jacob's friend—a year ago. Mitchell told me Jacob moved. Jacob met someone. Jacob was doing well.

"I heard."

Silence expands and I try to imagine what I will do when this call ends. How will I put it out of my mind, calm down, find sleep? What ritual will keep my mind from spinning, my thoughts from spiraling down, down, down?

"What do you want?" I ask, and I hate the harshness in my

voice. I want to be peaceful and magnanimous, not a raw open wound oozing through the phone. And yet, I sound angry. I am angry. Still.

"Did you pay the bill?"

"Not yet."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know."

"Did you read the letter?" The letter, included in the envelope with the bill, informed me I could either pay the six-hundred-dollar annual fee to keep our seven embryos frozen, or I could opt to destroy them. The South Carolina legislature was considering a bill that would change IVF by categorizing embryos as human beings. The new law would make it a crime to destroy them. If that happens, I may be signing up to pay the six-hundred-dollar fee in perpetuity to avoid criminal charges. Or, of course, I could use them. Septo-mom.

"I'm gonna have them destroyed," I say, though I wasn't sure of it before this moment. "We aren't going to use them; I don't know why I have even saved them this long." Even as I speak, I am not sure whether I hope he will protest.

Jacob is silent and I'm surprised. I do expect him to agree, to express gratitude for making this easy, letting him off the hook, once and for all.

"I can pay it," Jacob says.

"Why?"

"I just—I may want to use them someday."

"What?"

"I mean, I may want to use them. I do want to use them."

"You want to use them? To have a baby? We haven't spoken in two years." And yet, a bubble of possibility is rising

within me. I have let go of Jacob, of our life together, but with only one sentence he springs the hinge on the hope stowed deep down in my subconscious.

"No, I mean. That's not what I mean."

The surge shifts into something else—confusion? rage?—as the possibilities of his meaning trickle into my brain. "What do you mean?"

"I mean…" He pauses and I wait. "*I* want to use them. I'm seeing someone. I've been seeing someone since I moved back up here, and… it's serious. And we want kids. Someday. But, she can't—she is older. But I think we want kids. And she is open to using our embryos."

"Our embryos." Somehow, in my wildest dreams, this hasn't occurred to me. Jacob and I were together for six years before we froze the embryos. I was thirty-four, the realities of my biological clock settling over me. I wanted kids, and I wanted Jacob. I had a good, steady job and a man I loved. But he wasn't ready. The reasons, those stated and those silent, were plentiful.

Jacob worked in construction, scraping together projects, bringing on bursts of cash followed by droughts between jobs. An injury could sideline him for weeks, and years of playing rugby had left him with a bad back. He needed to find something steady, a job with benefits. He needed to be worthy of me, of our potential children. He needed a cortisone shot, one big job, a new certification—and, it turned out, a different woman. Still, back then I heard *reasons* rather than excuses, and I pushed him to make the embryos. To preserve the option.

"Hopefully we won't ever need them," I had said. "When we are ready, hopefully, I'll just get pregnant naturally. This is just a precaution, so we have the option." I had watched my

friends struggle through miscarriages and IVF, through cycles of hope and loss and pain. He listened to me describe it, of course, but his knowledge wasn't intimate. Still, he agreed, and we went through the process, the hormone injections, the extraction, the insemination, and genetic testing. In the end, we got seven—a great yield—and I relaxed. The future could take its time.

"No," I say now. "You can't use them."

I try to conjure the woman Jacob is *seeing*. The woman he is ready to have children with. The woman he gets out of bed for each day. By the time we ended, Jacob hadn't gotten out of bed or left the house in months. He wouldn't see a therapist, wouldn't go to physical therapy, or take medication. He was in quicksand, slipping beneath the grains with a resignation that seemed intentional. He would rather sink to the depths of the hole than rise to the heights of my expectations.

Jacob had always struggled with depression. Years of therapy have helped me to see the darkness was a part of what made him attractive. My urge to save him, my satisfaction in being the light in someone's life. I liked to be his one good thing. It was a role that made sense to me. Until it didn't.

Dr. Novali would say I was repeating a pattern. I had seen my father make sacrifices to support my mother through her battle with cancer—a valiant, eight-year struggle that ended in defeat. And then it was me who learned to swallow my desires in the interest of the family. I needed to be home after school for Evan and Jade. I needed to stay close to home rather than flee far for college. My value was equal to my contributions. It never occurred to me that it should be different.

It didn't start that way with Jacob. When we met, I was

working in publishing, eager to climb the ladder, thrilled to work in the literary world with so many others whose lives had also been shaped more by characters and plots than actual human interaction. When we met, he was happy and hopeful, planning a home remodeling business that would give him financial and creative freedom. We could see our futures unfolding, side-by-side, a gorgeous pursuit of our separate dreams. Jacob didn't have a bad day for the first year we were together, and when the first one arrived, my response was a reflex. A work trip canceled, a conference missed, emails delayed. It felt good to take care of him. It felt good to be needed, for a while.

Eventually, his needs grew heavy. I was not a young girl trapped in my childhood home. I had glimpsed another version of life, experienced joy derived from dreams and talent. His bad days were repeated, sometimes growing into weeks and months, a crushing heaviness I bore with silent fury, tallying the friendships, the plans, the future we were losing. Still, I said nothing. I longed for change; I was terrified of losing him.

Jacob is talking again. "I know it's a big deal, and it's probably a surprise, and—we can talk. We should talk. I want you to meet Adrienne. You'll like her. And we can work out whatever you want; we can work it out."

"No."

"CeCe, please consider it. Please think about it."

"No. No. Those are mine. You can't use them."

"But you've been paying to keep them frozen. Were you thinking you would use them someday?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I didn't think about it."

"Well. But. I mean. You did keep them." He says it as

though this is evidence to support some theory. The truth rises in me and I swallow it. I don't say: *I kept them for us.* I don't tell him I am keeping them frozen to keep the ember alive. It is too sad. Too pathetic.

"So you're ready to have kids now?" I hear the bite in my tone, and it sounds petty. Resentful.

"Yeah. I'm sorry, CeCe. I'm sorry."

I hang up the phone, simmering with the indignity of the conversation, of the entire situation. Jacob is doing *well*. I had imagined him across town, living in a dim basement apartment, eating ramen and Cheetos and cans of peas, playing *Call of Duty* late into the night. I had pictured him gaining weight, losing money, feeling miserable. Sometimes I had imagined his funeral, myself—grieving—embraced by his family and friends. I pictured him realizing, one day, what he had lost, and coming to claim it. Even when Mitchell told me Jacob moved and met someone, I resisted the reality.

Now I imagine Adrienne. How old could she be? I am thirty-eight. Jacob is forty. Adrienne wants to implant my young egg into her body. How old is she? I picture crow's-feet and gray roots, his strong hands massaging her slackening skin. *No.* I haul myself out of bed and down the stairs, unearthing the Coastal letter and the bill.

Did you think of using them? I haven't. But I have taken comfort in their existence. Their existence allows me to turn down dates, to brand the last two years as "rebuilding years" for focusing on myself. *It's the year of Cecelia*, I say each January, as though I am in charge of my life. As though I am alone by choice.

I lift the Coastal Fertility envelope from the mail tray on

the marble countertop and reread the letter, considering my options. Seven embryos. If it were an even number, perhaps we could split them, each able to do what we wish. A friend once pointed out all seven of our embryos are technically twins, conceived at the same time. We could birth a basketball team of siblings, raised in different states, different homes. It would be a scientific study of nature versus nurture. Would they be depressives and martyrs like Jacob and I? Or could we nurture that out of them?

I could use them myself—have the baby Jacob and I had intended, raise him or her on my own. It wouldn't be a betrayal of Jacob. I wouldn't do it with another man, implant the embryo into someone else's body, pretend a third person plays some part in the biology of our creation. I would do it alone. Would it bring Jacob back to me—a creature made from our two halves, a baby sleeping in the sunlit second-floor back bedroom we always said would be a nursery?

I put the letter down again and wedge my feet into the sneakers near the front door. It is late but I need to move, to sweat the conversation with Jacob out of my mind. My phone dings while I am running, my heart racing, perspiration pouring down my face and chest. I ignore it, not ready to see any more from Jacob.

When I slow to a walk near my house, I look at my phone and see the notification was not from Jacob after all. It was Matt R., from my dating app. Matt R. wants to meet. Matt R. thinks we have a lot in common.

"Sure Matt," I type, though Matt and I surely do not have anything in common. "Let's have coffee tomorrow."

"How about I make you dinner at my place?"

The exchange—the push and pull of plans and power—is already exhausting. How do people do this? "How about coffee?" I reiterate, and he relents. I hope he drinks coffee. In our last year together, Jacob renounced caffeine, blaming it for the rise and fall of his psyche. Coffee became my guilty pleasure, sipped furtively at work, scrubbed from my breath before I walked in the door.

"Coffee sounds good. See you tomorrow."

I shower and then crawl back into bed to indulge in my worst habit: getting drunk on nostalgia. On my phone, I scroll through pictures of Jacob and me from years ago, searching for signs of what would come. But, as usual, there are no signs. There are no photos of the piles of laundry, the unwashed dishes, the disappointment I felt when I walked in the door at the end of each and every day, month after month. The pictures are bright, a portrait of a happy couple.

Why her? I text Jacob before I can help myself. It is embarrassing to ask and yet, it is all I can think of. Who is this Adrienne? What about her lets him rise each day with hope for the future?

He doesn't reply, and I think this is a gift. Or maybe he's just gone to sleep.

* * *

When I meet Matt for coffee the next morning, I am pleasantly surprised to find he is a clean-shaven freelance journalist who was previously married to his college girlfriend. (I have found divorcees are better than bachelors, at my age.) He orders a black coffee and swallows it like medicine. Like me, he has been on the apps for three years, and like me, he appears bored by the predictability of each question and each answer.

"Do you want kids?" he asks as though he already knows my response.

I nod, because I have always wanted kids. It isn't a hard question. It's just become hard to say it out loud, as the years have passed, the possibility dimming.

Matt says he wants kids *someday*, a familiar code indicating he is no different than the hundred dates that preceded him. Nonetheless, his sense of humor is self-deprecating and disarming, he pauses to consider before answering my questions and leans in to listen intently when I speak. He tells me he started cycling as a way to release tension, a recommendation from his therapist, and I am intrigued by this man who is curious and confident enough to seek help. We plan to meet for dinner the following weekend, giving each of us four days to formulate a plausible reason to cancel.

It is two days later when Jacob's reply to my question arrives. *I don't know.* And although I am in the middle of a meeting with my team, I read it and then go off camera, surprised by the tears that fall. I don't know what I wanted him to say. I don't know what words would be a salve.

Later that evening, alone in my house, I see I have a new email from Coastal Fertility.

Please complete the attached form to indicate your consent to destroy Embryos #74832, #27483, #37281…

I read it several times. I have not yet asked for the embryos to be destroyed. This must be Jacob's doing, and it feels like an act of love. One last kindness, a concession to my wishes. How do they destroy embryos? I imagine them thawing, softening, becoming vulnerable. I close the email, not sure whether I am ready to give up on the potential those blobs of

DNA represent.

I think of Matt's question, of the clarity I felt when I nodded my head. I want kids. I am just afraid it won't happen for me. Wanting has become a dangerous, vulnerable thing.

In the morning, I call Coastal Fertility and wait on hold for a surprisingly long time before a woman answers, her voice strained. She introduces herself as Susan and apologizes for the wait. "Obviously we are experiencing a much higher than usual call volume." I imagine the other women calling in—the women desperate for babies, the women who froze embryos before going through chemo, the women who had tried everything else before emptying their savings for Coastal Fertility—somehow, I never thought of them before.

"I wanted to know whether it was possible to preserve some of my embryos but not all of them," I say, and Susan explains the change it will cause in my billing, the method they use to select which to preserve, the timing for destruction. It echoes the roadmap that guided my past experience: a literal application of *survival of the fittest.* Four years earlier nineteen eggs were harvested from my thirty-four-year-old uterus, thirteen of which survived insemination. After genetic testing, only seven remained viable, deemed optimal specimens. The others were destroyed, though it hadn't felt like murder.

"My ex requested that all seven embryos be destroyed. If I consent, but decide to retain one or two, will he be notified that some have been retained?"

"He will be notified if you attempt to use the embryos while they are in our care because his name is on the account, but honestly, if I were you, I would transfer whichever ones you want to keep out of the state. I don't know how long we will be

able to stay open with the way the laws are changing. The doctors are worried about their own liability."

"How would that work?"

She explains the intricacies of exporting the embryos and it is clear she has given the speech many times.

I tell her I will think it over and hang up, letting the possibilities settle over me. I look again at the email requesting my consent. I imagine Jacob's conversation with Adrienne, the way he settles into his chair before delivering bad news, looking down while he speaks and then looking up, into my—her—eyes to gauge the reaction. Had Adrienne really wanted this—to carry his ex-girlfriend's baby in her body? We'd never even met. What did she know of me—who was I in the story Jacob told? Maybe a part of her would be relieved to take this option off the table. Maybe not. Would she show her dismay? My disappointment used to deflate him, so I hid my desires, my successes, my expectations. I buried myself in the hope of resurrecting him.

When Jacob left, I was bereft. For two years, I have inventoried the opportunities I missed, the ways I went wrong, the love I let slip through my fingers. I've relived the day he left—the day he rallied himself to pack bags, to say goodbye—countless times, imagining the fierce pressure of his arms around me, the hug I didn't believe would be our last. I had waited and begged and promised I would change. I had committed to demanding less, accepting his depression, his limitations. But still he left.

I imagine Adrienne—whoever she is—now bearing the burden of Jacob's emotions. I feel a heaviness that may be jealousy or may be something else. Empathy? Maybe. For a moment I am Adrienne, sitting on a sofa in a room far north of

here, the sky outside eternally gray. I hold my breath as I consider my response, measure my reaction before revealing it, a habit too entrenched to erase. I see myself cross the room to Jacob, sit on his lap, collapse into the hard warmth of him, luxuriate in his embrace. I feel his release, relief. But when the Adrienne version of me stands, she is heavy with all that went unsaid. She must wonder whether he will be happy without children. Wonder how he can love her and also want children who are half of me. She must yearn for him to see the feelings she cannot voice.

I look at the phone in front of me. I could call Jacob and talk it through. I could explain my reservations, my fears, my need to keep a sliver of hope alive for the future I once thought I owned. He would listen and sigh deeply, unable to make a decision, unable to give me what I want. He will not surprise me. I don't call him.

With a blue pen, I mark up the consent form before I sign it, modifying it to reflect my own preferences—the only ones that matter anymore. I use my phone to scan and email it back to Coastal Fertility. I find I am relieved. Almost grateful for the unilateral decision. I don't have to live in reaction to him anymore. I don't have to accept his open arms, his broad chest—his good intentions—as consolation for his shortcomings. I can make a choice without apology or explanation. This is the silver lining to my loss: when Jacob left, he released me. He gifted me a freedom I have refused to see, my back to the door for all this time.

I hesitate before I text Jacob, indulging in a fantasy of defiance. If I didn't text him, would he ever ask? Probably not. But I reach out anyway, another pesky habit, the need for a

period at the end of a paragraph.

All done. I write. Because what's done is done.

* * *

I am reviewing a presentation for work when my personal email dings. Coastal Fertility has sent me an extraction form for the two remaining embryos. I open the PDF and fill it out. Both embryos will be transferred to a clinic in Pennsylvania. When I sign, I release the clinic from liability in the event the embryos are damaged during their transition. Susan assured me the embryos would remain in a deep freeze through the transfer, unscathed by the shifting landscape, but now I contemplate car crashes and broken cooling systems.

I have a date with Matt the next evening. We meet for dinner and stay for dessert, ordering decaf cappuccinos to extend our time together. We talk about our jobs, our families of origin, our hobbies—he wants me to try cycling with him, and it occurs to me that relationships can open doors, push you out of your comfort zone. I confess that bikes hurt my butt.

"But you'll get used to it after a few times. You have to keep riding through that pain."

"I'll get used to the pain? Or it will stop hurting?"

He laughs like I'm joking. "It stops hurting. You just can't give up after the first time or you won't get to the other side of it."

Conversation turns to the week ahead and the week we just finished. Fueled by the bottle of wine we drank, or maybe just the sense of intimacy we have created at our candlelit corner table, I tell him about the embryos, the need to move them out of the state. I focus on the absurdity of the situation to avoid the pinch of pain the topic raises in me.

"Can you imagine wanting to use the embryos in some other woman? I mean, she has never even met me."

Matt nods thoughtfully, considering. Perhaps he, like me, is trying to picture this woman. "Did you say yes?"

"No. I said no."

"Are you planning to use them?"

"I don't know. Not right now." I want to tell him that I destroyed some—but only some—of them, that I kept two as a nest egg for myself, an insurance policy. But I don't go into the details.

"It's kind of lovely," he observes, and I wonder where he is going with this. "The potential they represent. The possibility. If one of you were to pass away, you could leave a legacy with those embryos."

I wonder if I can be with a man who says *pass away* instead of *die*. His impulse to sugarcoat is suddenly repulsive. I wish I hadn't told him about the embryos. I moved too fast. The only thing less sexy than the harsh realities of fertility planning is a man's opinion on the topic.

"Well, hopefully, no one dies any time soon." I look for the waiter, suddenly desperate to leave. I picture my embryos preparing for their trip, moving north into a new climate, resilient when confronted with transition.

* * *

Three days later Matt texts me a news article about a South Carolina fertility clinic torched by political protestors. *Good thing you're getting your little guys out of dodge,* he writes.

I click through the link, annoyed by his use of the phrase *little guys* to describe a pile of cells. The picture that comes up on the screen is familiar, and my breath catches. It is not *some*

fertility clinic. It is Coastal Fertility, still standing, though the windows are blown out, the insides clearly charred.

I freeze, holding my breath as I scroll through the article. No one was harmed. The fire was set in the middle of the night, and the culprit has already been identified: Marjorie Maynor, the leader of a local True Patriots group who was a loud voice on the issue of fetal personhood. She is in custody, apparently unavailable for a quote. The paper dug up old talking points from her Facebook page where she decried IVF as legalized murder and wrote lengthy rants about God's intentions. The article includes a link to her personal page and the page of True Patriots.

Matt sends a follow-up article in which a representative for the True Patriots praises Marjorie Maynor's vigilante approach to justice and appears surprised that the facility not only conducted fertility treatments but also housed embryos. *I hope yours are all right,* Matt texts.

I want to send the article to Jacob, but Jacob thinks the embryos were already destroyed. I consider replying to Matt but don't want to try to explain the sharp wound opening inside of me as I review images of the scorched facility. I call Coastal, hoping to talk with Susan, but get a busy tone. I wonder whether my last two embryos were extracted before the match was struck. Maybe they are safe in Pennsylvania.

I've avoided imagining the possibilities the two remaining embryos represent. Their preservation somehow made it possible for me to let go of the future I had attached to the seven test tubes Jacob and I had created.

I dial the clinic again and am again met with only a flat beep, droning into my ear. I won't have answers today. I may

not tomorrow. I rest my phone on the counter and turn on the television. On the local news, Marjorie Maynor's face looks haggard. I try to direct my anger in her direction, the villain in this tale. But I can't rouse myself to hate her. I feel something else, something dull and empty I can't quite name.

I turn the television off and go out the back door to the shed, where my bike rests against a wall, tires deflated, a layer of grimy dust covering the bright red bars I once admired. I touch the seat tentatively, its firm confidence a threat, and wheel it into the sunlight, using my sleeve to remove some of the black crust from the frame. There is a pump in the shed, and I fill the tires, using more strength than I expected. The exertion is soothing.

I bought this bike three years earlier, an initiative to get Jacob out of the house, to give us a shared hobby. He had mounted his with a grimace and made it a few blocks before stopping and walking it home. I apologized, seeing my miscalculation, and walked home beside him. It was hot that day, the sun punishing, and I longed to climb onto my new bike and feel the wind in my hair, to soar over routes that took ages to walk. But it felt like bragging, my ability to fly.

I mount the bike unsteadily, pedaling down my driveway and out to the street. I want to stay on the sidewalk, protected from passing cars and the tyranny of traffic laws, but I veer into the street instead, living dangerously. My neighborhood breezes by, familiar facades a flash in the passing scenery.

When I get to Coastal Fertility, I am drenched in sweat, the humidity oppressive and draining. I let my bike fall to the ground and sit on the curb to survey the scene in front of me. There is yellow tape around the building, one car still in the

parking lot, trapped by the ongoing investigation. I run my fingers over the spikes of grass lining the curb, appreciating their tough resilience, their consistency. My finger catches on a stem, softer and juicier than its neighboring growth, and I close my fingers around it, snapping it, lifting the yellow dandelion head to my nose. I recall vaguely that a yellow flower can reveal a love of butter or evolve into a puff you blow on to make a wish.

Before I mount my bike, I cross the street to rest the flower on the curb in front of the burned-out building, gently exhaling the last of my wishes for this place. The ride home feels longer than the ride there, and I know when I wake in the morning I will ache.

I snap a picture of my bike and text it to Matt. *Got her out of retirement this morning.*

His response is almost immediate. *Nice! If you aren't too sore tomorrow, let me show you my favorite trail.*

I go back outside and look at the bike, still dirty. When I touch the seat, the handlebars, I imagine the bike is humming its gratitude in my direction, preening, hoping to be touched and used.

"What do you think?" I ask it out loud. "Should we ride again?"

* * *

It is nearly a month before someone answers the phone at Coastal Fertility, a young man who I picture wearing a suit in a skyscraper, the undertaker for the facility's carcass. I read out all seven embryo numbers from the letter I had received, bracing to learn their fate.

"Yeah, I have the records. It looks like the three slated for destruction were lost in the fire, but the four selected for

relocation had already been removed. They should be safely in New York by now."

It takes me a moment to understand what he is saying. Four? New York? "You mean Pennsylvania. Two in Pennsylvania."

"Oh yes. I'm sorry. Two in Pennsylvania"—I release the breath I had held. That makes more sense. He continues—"and two in Syracuse, New York."

"I'm sorry. I only requested the transfer of two embryos. To Pennsylvania. Who requested the other two?" Though of course, I know. The voice on the phone confirms that Jacob filed the request for removal the day after I did. I look back through our messages. He must have done it when he received my text message.

All done, I had written.

And he thought I was.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What are the factors that cause a person to "move on" after a breakup? Why is Cecelia having so much trouble moving on?
2. What individual rights should Cecelia and Jacob have to the fertilized eggs being retained? Would you support a law enshrining those rights, or should they be rights based on the conversation between the two parties?
3. Cecelia has been going to therapy for two years related to her breakup with Jacob. Is the fact that she is still struggling with their breakup proof the therapy isn't working? How do you know if therapy is working?
4. If either Cecelia or Jacob used one of the fertilized eggs with a new partner to make a baby, do they have an obligation to tell the other? Would you rather know, or not know, you have your biological child out in the world? Why or why not?
5. If Jacob was the one struggling with depression and other issues, why is he the one that ended the relationship? What (*if anything*) does that tell you about each of them and their relationship?

* * *

Devil Do, Devil Don't

Delaney Kelly

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Violence; Moderate Intensity

* * *

My moms said I get to scorch the earth, but only if I do my chores. No Armageddon till after breakfast either. So I swept and wiped the countertops and tossed a Birthday Cake Pop-Tart in my mouth, then got dressed to raise hell.

Arugula's my name, after the most despicable of the leafy vegetables. Or, as it's known in Hell, The Devil's Lettuce. Though my parents, cornballs that they are, mostly call me Our Little Devil Girl.

Mom One didn't quite know what she was getting into when she adopted literal demon spawn, but she and Mom Two make do. It's kind of a trial-and-error situation by design. Like in sixth grade, when I got sent to the principal's office for unleashing a cloud of locusts in the cafeteria. You should have seen the look on Susie Smithton's face as she tugged the insects' prone bodies from her blonde updo. In my defense, the poor

creatures were lying dormant underground for decades, and so they were very hungry. Principal Marmish didn't want to hear it; he said this fared poorly for my "behavioral compliance record." I didn't know what this meant, but I knew my admittance to the Saint Lilith School for Fair-Minded Fowl was contingent upon my behaving like a good girl ought.

Though I'll always be evil on some level, Principal Marmish said, "Good deeds can be taught." I like how my moms show me love no matter what. Love isn't unconditional in the underworld. That's how I ended up at the orphanage in the first place. And while my moms and I might not speak the same language when it comes to love—they, with their hot porridge and pushes on the swing set, and me, with my seven plagues and lots and lots of biting—I'm learning to translate it because I want them to feel loved too.

Every morning, before the school bus hums to a stop in front of our lawn gnome garden—the gnomes' painted faces all rust-tinged after a regrettable bout of blood rain—Mom One tugs my hair into a ponytail while Mom Two fastens my tail with a neat white bow. My uniform is made of itchy green and white knit that the school tailor-made to prevent my claws from leaving indents in the fibers. I smile wide to demonstrate I've brushed my teeth, especially all the way in the back, where my fangs are, as well as between the hinges that dislodge the hellmouth. My moms hand me my lunch pail, decorated with some smiling cartoon character I've never seen, but they say will help me make friends. Today, they've given me raw entrails and fatty tumors—my favorite.

The bus driver gives a friendly wave out the window. He knows I loathe that. "Make good choices!" says Mom One

encouragingly. Mom Two gives me a wet kiss on my cheek, which inadvertently scorches her lips. I'm still figuring out how to control my heat.

"We love you!" they say in unison. But I'm already out of earshot, on the bus, trying to find the least detestable person to sit next to. They all avert their eyes as I walk past, hands folded neatly in their laps just as they were taught in etiquette class.

As I scan over their heads, my eyes drift to another head, ducked behind my moms' azaleas, a hidden camera resting among the branches. Of course, it's a reporter from the *Kansas Morning Star*, hiding in the bushes just like he does every morning. *Keep your cool, Devil Girl*, I say to myself, reciting my moms' mantra. *What they want is a story. Don't give them the satisfaction.* As the bus rumbles to life, a flash captures my face and I fall into an empty seat, balled fists burning through the pockets of my pleated skirt.

The best thing about the first day at Saint Lilith School is show and tell. Sandwiched between morning recitations and afternoon tea, all the seventh-grade students are corralled into the gymnasium, where we get to stand before our classmates and share What We Love Most in the World. It's the one day a year where we can talk at length about our passions without the teachers scolding us for "scaring the other students" and "using an excess of realistic human limbs in our demonstration." I sit at the edge of my folding chair, waiting for the end of the alphabet when I can finally take my turn.

Callie Callawader brings in her extensive collection of historical dolls, bending their plasticky limbs at the elbow to wave at the crowd and explain what great American atrocities they bore witness to. This American Girl drowned aboard the

Titanic! This American Girl contracted tuberculosis after falling down a mine shaft! It's all very morbid—I love every second of it.

Susie Smithton, as per usual, brings in her chihuahua named Paprika. She makes him trot across the stage in a tutu, his quivering tongue flopped out the side of his mouth. I almost feel sorry for him; back in Hell, chihuahuas are considered a chewy, protein-rich delicacy.

After Susie, it's finally my turn. I take to the stage with my flail in hand. It's got a nice long chain and sharp spikes. It's the ideal defensive weapon in a number of ways, I explain, due to the potential for combined piercing and bludgeoning damage. With one fluid motion that I practiced at home, I swing the flail into a stuffed mannequin at the foot of the stage. Only, I don't notice that Paprika had started using the toy to mark his territory. With his leg still raised in the air as if in a dainty pirouette, I send the chihuahua flying into the rafters, urine raining down over the crowd.

* * *

"Arugula!" My moms only use my real name when I'm in serious trouble.

"In my defense, the dog being there was not like I rehearsed," I say. Principal Marmish stands before me at his desk, with Mom One and Mom Two next to me. Though their eyes crinkle kindly when they look at me, I can see that their hands, clasped together on the armrest, are knuckled white.

"Behavioral compliance," continues the principal. "Bringing a medieval weapon to show and tell is not in compliance with the behavioral standards set by the Lilith School."

"Did you know that Paprika the chihuahua once chewed off a woman's face?" I say. "It's true. Susie proudly told the whole class. Statistically, that dog has caused more violence than my flail."

Principal Marmish's eyes skip over mine and go straight to the moms. "As much as we've enjoyed the presence of your, uh… *daughter*… here, I am more concerned than ever that her conduct is… ungovernable."

"Principal Marmish, with all due respect," says Mom One, "this is her third school in one year. We pay tuition just like any other parents here. That is, what's not covered by the generous merit scholarship that our daughter rightfully earned."

"She is bright," adds Mom Two. "What our Devil Girl lacks in behavioral regulation, she makes up for in aptitude. And if she can learn her equations in record time, surely she can just as well learn how to behave like any good girl ought."

"Of that, I'm afraid, I'm no longer certain," says the principal. "As you already know, her transition here has been further complicated by the… media attention surrounding her arrival." At this he eyes me slouched in my seat, gnawing at the ends of my claws. I watch as the nails regenerate one by one.

"But that's not her fault!" exclaims Mom One. I haven't seen her this angry since I opened a portal to Hell underneath the playground slide, swallowing up the Dobsons' kids. "Our Devil Girl wants to fit in just like everyone else, don't you sweetie?"

I nod, though I'm still thinking about my flail, what flimsy lock in the school storage could be confining it right now, and what I will do to Susie Smithton's hairspray-hardened, chihuahua-urine-soaked hairdo the next time I see her.

"It's the fault of Devendra Moody and her lackeys at the *Kansas Morning Star* who make Our Devil Girl feel unwanted and alone!" adds Mom Two. "And, well… people like you!"

Principal Marmish uses his argyle tie to wipe flecks of Mom Two's spit from his cheek. "I know of one last resort." He slides a pamphlet toward my moms, emblazoned with a rosy-cheeked sun and rainbow holding hands. "If we do not see a marked improvement in your child's evildoings by the end of the first quarter, I'm afraid we will have no choice but to have her forcibly removed."

* * *

My moms have put up with me for a long time. At the orphanage where the nuns kept me caged and collared, the headmistress informed them I was a "problem child" and "required a lot of tee-ell-see." But my moms didn't care. Or rather, we were each other's last resort. They'd been on the waiting lists for dozens of children over the years, but when they showed up for the in-person interviews, their applications mysteriously fell from file folders, the phone line to the orphanage ringing dead. Mom One says it's because places discriminate against two-mom couples. People think it's "unnatural." I nodded over my Pop-Tarts knowingly. The nuns, too, had told me it was "unnatural" to scale the walls of the orphanage, sniffing out whichever orphan girl had gotten her period, and then tearing up her wastebasket with my teeth, even though I hadn't been offered any alternatives to my unrelenting bloodlust. It wasn't "normal" to set myself on fire during gym class, even though dodgeball is considered a cruel and unusual punishment even in Hell.

The mortal world, as I've come to understand it, is made

up of arbitrary rules that are best left unquestioned because everyone else knows them to be good and correct. As long as my moms are the best moms they can be, eventually, everyone will come to accept them as they are, and then the rules can be changed. Such is the case with me, they reason. I'm a Good Little Devil Girl at heart.

The place on the smiling brochure turns out to be a behavioral corrections facility. Two Shoes LLC is located in a barren office park off of the highway with a small playground surrounded on all sides by a tall slab of concrete. The playground has a single creaky swing set and a hot metal slide. Miss Cheever introduces herself as the instructor who will be overseeing my care. She wears a tight smile and wide dangly earrings that are perfectly structured for yanking. In the mornings, she says, I will work one-on-one with her on my "violent outbursts." In the afternoons, I will be forced to share toys with other children in a sterile white room I immediately notice is flame-retardant. In the evenings, should I cause any kind of fuss at home, Miss Cheever explains to my moms that they are welcome to utilize the overnight drop-off service.

"That won't be necessary," assures Mom One as I tug on a loose string, unraveling her knit scarf. Miss Cheever bends low to meet my eyes and says in her honey-sweet voice that I am "always welcome here." I know now I need to retrieve my flail as soon as possible. And potentially some bleach and ammonia, if I can acquire them in time.

The next morning, Miss Cheever runs over a series of regimented exercises with me in the isolation room. Her face stretched like taffy to accommodate all the teeth in her smile, she locks my hands and feet into cuffs attached to a metal seat.

Projected on the white walls in front of me are the words THIS IS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. The bright lights make my eyes sting, but I try as a good girl ought to focus on the flash cards Miss Cheever is showing me. My task is simple: she reads a scenario, and I have to say whether the action presented is GOOD or BAD. I get the first one wrong. Something about how it's wrong to lead a crawling baby into traffic. My cuffs vibrate and shake with electricity, and I feel the hairs on my back stand on end all the way down to my tail.

"Let's try again," Miss Cheever says curtly. I get zapped again and again until I can understand the way things are properly done.

Re-homing injured birds is GOOD.

Smacking a police officer with his own baton is BAD.

After five consecutive correct answers, Miss Cheever sticks a peppermint on my tongue as a reward. The painful minty sting sets my senses on fire, and I feel my mouth start to percolate foam. It makes me miss the moms' packed lunches—the taste of home, of roadkill and diseased liver. It makes me realize this facility—with its rusty playground equipment and unusually perky teacher—will never truly understand me.

In the afternoon, Miss Cheever cheerily introduces the person who is to be my "buddy" for Supervised Play. She just got dropped off from the local school, and she's very excited to volunteer with Underserved Children, meaning me. Unlocking my shackles, Miss Cheever brings forward Susie Smithton, shaking like her chihuahua.

Immediately Susie makes for the door, but Miss Cheever already has it barred.

"Now, Susie here—" she says, tugging the girl by the scruff

of her knit uniform, "—she wants to play dolls with you."

I know Susie doesn't really want to play with me—no one does. She wants to leave this room immediately into her parents' warm human embrace, who will reward her troubles with a trip to Milky's for strawberry sorbet. But here we are, both doing things we'd rather not do, and I at least have the decency to pretend. So I grab a doll from Miss Cheever's teaching box and sink my teeth into the seam where its head meets its neck.

Miss Cheever forces my wrists back on the table. "That doll belongs to Susie," she says, her words sharper this time. "Can you ask her if you can play with it?"

Seeing Susie before me, her lip quivering and her eyes as glossy as a doll's, I recognize the human feeling of dread. I see it every time I approach one of my classmates on the playground, offering to show them the way I like to play, though of course, no one plays like I do, because the way that I am is weird and bad. BAD, I realize, just like on Miss Cheever's flash cards. It's no wonder, then, that girls like Susie regard me with fear and distrust. I'm bad in the way that licking ice cream in the grocery store is BAD, bad like a bruise when all you wanted was to play nice.

I try to say this to Susie, only my tongue gets stuck translating into kindness and understanding, the letters curling into guttural growls and the dark beckonings of where I'm from. Susie falls back in her chair, sprinting for the door again, and before I know it, my claws are wrapped around her wrist on the doorknob, my talons poking through my school-issued tennis shoes latched onto her blonde updo, and I'm twisting, turning bones in new directions, all while Susie shrieks like a bird in its last laps with death.

* * *

Mom One and Mom Two are not pleased to receive a call from Two Shoes. Comments back and forth about how I "was doing so well" and assuring the teacher that "this isn't like me at all." I no longer understand why they feel I can be good since they signed the adoption papers that certified I never would be. "This is for your own good," my moms say simultaneously, squeezing my hands. But I remember those same words projected on the walls of the isolation room, and my wrists begin to ache in the spot where Miss Cheever did all the zapping.

It's decided, then, that I will stay overnight at Two Shoes. I can tell my moms wish the three of us were pouring molten aluminum on an ant colony right about now—a pleasurable weekday pastime—instead of locking me in a jail cell for the night.

"When you behave like this," Mom One says, her hands reaching through the bars, "you let them win."

Mom Two gives me a sad smile and flicks off the light. Sitting there alone on the cold hard ground, I feel like I'm back in the orphanage, and I wonder why I keep ending up in places that don't even try to understand me. Maybe I felt misunderstood in the moment with Susie, but that doesn't mean she deserved to have her arms broken in multiple places. Something flickers and jolts inside. I feel a bud spreading, shedding its infantile leaves and casting its petals to the sky. A new feeling. I think it's called remorse. Something foreign, something not ingrained in me in the underworld. Which means it's of this new world, something learned. I have the capacity to learn.

I can't stay in this place any longer, I decide. It's too scary

and dark, and not in the fun way but in a way that only reminds me of exclusion and pain. I can't go home either—my moms can't know I broke the rules again. Wresting apart the cell bars with my claws—which isn't very hard, after all, since they'd never meant to contain a literal demon child before—I kick in the door to the outside and head toward the school playground. If there's any security watching me, all they'd see through the camera is my trusty cloud of locusts. Dawn is breaking through the clouds as I exit the office park. I make sure to look out for any reporters rustling around in the bushes. What I don't look for, however, are cars, specifically any white vans currently idling in the Two Shoes parking lot with the logo of the local news station painted on the side.

* * *

Devendra Moody of the *Kansas Morning Star* corners me on the playground while I'm in the middle of twisting off the heads of pigeons I'd accumulated on our last family trip to Kansas City. I keep them in a plastic baggy in my locker for periods of intense boredom. As soon as I see Devendra's boxy frame traipse onto the blacktop, I stash the bag in a sewer grate and try to look as prim and proper as a twelve-year-old demon child possibly can.

"Having a nice time?" she asks, spreading her mauve lipsticked lips wide like a fish gasping for water. I nod and hobble on one foot like I've seen the other kids do when playing skip rope.

"You don't play well with the other kids, do you? That's why you're alone?" Devendra Moody says with a pitying inflection. She reveals that she is the long-lost aunt of Mom One or Mom Two—she can't remember which—and that she's here

to pick me up from school early. I have a dentist's appointment. She says I can get a frozen custard cone from Milky's if I behave like a good little girl ought and get in the van.

I don't know whether my moms have distant relatives. Outside family isn't talked about between us. It is a sensitive subject, I gather, just like the nature of my birth. It goes so completely unmentioned that I'm still unsure whether humans really come from other humans, or, like me, they burst forth, fully formed, from the abstract concept of evil in a cloud of brimstone and ash. I also know I don't have a dentist appointment because my dentist retired after he miscalculated the strength of my molars, and now every other Tuesday the moms said I have to hand-deliver flowers to his room at Saint Raphael Inpatient Care. Something is up with Devendra Moody, and in any case, I am under strict orders by my moms to never, ever talk to strangers, more for their sake than for mine. But still I go with Devendra because I've just disposed of my pigeon heads, and I am still very, very bored.

"Remember to always be good."

Those are the words etched and underlined in chalk at the top of the board at Saint Lilith School. We have to scrawl it in our notebooks at the start of every day, before the morning announcements and after the Pledge of Allegiance. The other stuff, like the Three Tenets of Good-Naturedness, we have memorized. I run through them in my head as Devendra Moody leads me by the hand to her van, her long mauve press-on nails digging into my skin. In the back, there is a man with a big camera in the crook of his shoulder. I recognize him as the same man who hides in our bushes every morning. He waves hello to me, then a blinking red light appears on his camera,

waiting expectantly to capture my every action.

Tenet #1: Always listen to authority in times of uncertainty.

There's a table in the van with a big bowl of candy, which I reach for because it has the kind of wrappers that end up in oceans and get lodged in the throats of baby sea turtles. I spit it out with disgust, that familiar foamy feeling in my throat. Peppermint again. Devendra smirks, like she anticipated this response. She unveils a cooler from under her seat, and the smell of its contents immediately makes my mouth water. It's a special treat, the kind of dessert my moms let me have only on special occasions, like if I go a whole week at school without a behavioral demerit.

It is, of course, fish from the local pond, pimply and oil-slick with chemical runoff from the nearby factory. My stomach rumbles to life—I haven't had a proper meal in days. I look to Devendra and the cameraman for confirmation that this isn't some sort of test. But Devendra's eyes crinkle kindly like my moms' before serving a good meal, and the cameraman's glassy black lens only reflects my own hungry expression. I stuff my face with fish after fish, grinding the bones underneath my incisors.

"Is it good?" Devendra asks sweetly. I only mumble a reply, my cheeks heavy with goopy black gills.

Tenet #2: Obedience without a smile is like a handshake without warmth.

After I finish wiping my mouth clean, Devendra says it won't be much longer until we are at the dentist's office, and if I do extra good and my teeth are squeaky clean, I'll get to play with my toys.

"I don't have any toys," I tell her.

"I think you do," she says, procuring my flail.

Instinctively my eyes go wide and my claws protract, though I know this is considered impolite. Without warning, a metal cuff from the seat locks around my neck, and I thrash against the restraints. I can feel my irises darkening, filling the whites of my eyes. The barrettes that pin my horns down into my hair strain as the horns go up, up, fiery and red, until they ping off my head entirely. Of course, this is what they want. They want to see the hellfire come out. They want to see just how unlike a Real Girl I really am.

"That's good, yes, make sure you get that," Devendra whispers into the ear of the cameraman, who zooms in on my distressed face. "When someone shows you what their true essence is, believe them."

"Agreed," says the man, his camera lens a cyclops eye. "Anyone can see this isn't a real girl. Who are they fooling? These people… they never know when to leave well enough alone."

"Don't they know that goodness can't be taught?" Devendra smirks with her characteristic purple fish-gasp smile. "It's ingrained, like commercial jingles and knowing your left from your right."

Tenet #3: Don't be afraid to stand out from the crowd if it means doing the right thing.

If it wasn't already obvious before, we definitely aren't headed to the dentist. There are no windows in the back of the van, but I can tell from all the bumps that we aren't on the main road anymore. There's only one place they could be taking me. I know because I used to play with cars around here after school before I got caught. We are driving toward, and rapidly

approaching, the quarry. I used to toss residents' little hybrid cars over the cliff face, watching as their windshields and wheels and flimsy metal interiors crushed against the sharp rocks, leaving a satisfying splash in the crystalline water. A shiver rolls down my tail. This doesn't bode well for my fleshy body that, while made of devil stuff, is still not as impenetrable as a Toyota Prius.

Devendra and her lackeys are going to jump out of the van, leaving me locked inside as I tumble over the edge. They know that no one besides my moms will scrutinize my disappearance. If anyone does question it, they have the footage to prove I'm a threat to society, that I don't deserve to be here, just like my moms don't deserve to have me. I dig my claws into the van's seat until the stuffing and the springs come out, letting my tongue lap at the memory of dark ancestral calls long forgotten. I tug at them in my mind with a thread that twists and ties loose connections, reaching for something, anything, to hear my cry.

The ground begins to ripple and surge. Gravel rumbles up in chunks, causing the van to bounce. The two news reporters tumble from their seats. Devendra dents her hairdo.

"What is that—" she starts. It's a thunderous sound, a dark ripple fracturing through all that is joyful and good in this world. The mechanical sound of a mouth widening further, further, into a great big yawn, and then clamping shut, its teeth sunk deep in the dirt core of all living things. And then.

The van doors fly off, revealing a sea of black tentacles wriggling from beneath the broken-up earth like loose ribbons in a schoolgirl's hair. Their suckers hiss and pop, searching for something to grasp. One finds Devendra's heel and starts to drag

her out the back of the van. She kicks off her shoe and a couple tentacles squeal in pain.

"Driver, step on it!" she shouts, readjusting her hair. "This demon is trying to drag us down with her. She's taking us to Hell. She's taking us home!"

Devendra Moody is only half right. My Devil Girl body strains further until the cage of its flesh starts to groan, tearing through the schoolgirl uniform that was specially tailored to me and my quirks, ripping through the seams in every carefully buttoned outfit my moms so gently laid out for me each morning. My body is red, dimpled with hell scars, the body of a grotesque thing, not resembling a girl at all. But before the reporters in front of me have a chance to scream, the van's back wheels spin at the edge of the cliff. In front of us, black tentacles from below—my neighbors (Hey, Frank!)—grabbing hold of the van's front wheels, while the driver of the van tries to rev the engine enough to bring us back up to solid ground. We are in limbo now, a game of patty cake between the underworld and a long, long way down. I can feel the dark territory of my old home searching for me, willing me to come back and join it, even though it so willfully gave me up the first time. But how to escape my fate at the bottom of this quarry too?

Then I remember the peppermint. I grab a fistful of the awful candy from the bowl—knocked over in the kerfuffle—and toss them into the sea of tentacles. They recoil in disgust, foaming out of their dozen tiny suckers. We're made of the same stuff, the tentacles and I, which means all the same things that hurt me hurt them, too, and in their home, they only know the language of pain. *Get me off of this cliff*, I tell them with a deep guttural growl. *And take me back right now.*

The tentacles tug the van back home—my real home, the blue house on a quiet street with the trim garden and the blood-soaked gnomes. And where my two moms are now pacing on the front porch as they listen to Two Shoes LLC on speakerphone tell them their child has gone missing. As soon as they see the news van pull into the driveway, my moms instinctually duck into the house. They don't know that I'm inside the van, let alone that I'm piloting it with the help of my tentacled neighbors from Hell.

"Wait!"

I rip the seat from the van, my neck still in the restraint, and rush toward them.

"It's me, Moms!" Mom One and Mom Two see me and we hug, even though I look more ghastly than girl, even though I still can't control my heat, and I hear the sizzle of the fabric of their clothes against my skin.

"We're so glad you're home safe!" they say, nuzzling our three faces together in a Moms-and-Devil Girl sandwich. I feel my horns retreat back into my hair, my claws retract.

Mom One gets a screwdriver and breaks me from my metal cuff, then we hug even tighter. We turn at the sound of Devendra Moody's lone heel clip-clop-clopping up the driveway. For the town's most esteemed newswoman, the sight of her on my TV screen would turn my stomach. Her once perfectly coiffed hair has malformed into one big tangle. Her expertly applied makeup has begun to melt off her face. Her blazer is torn where the tentacles tried to grab her. Only her mauve press-on nails remain perfectly in place as she points right between my devilish eyes.

"You!" she scowls. My moms pull me into the house with

Devendra stalking close behind. The cameraman stumbles out of the van and follows us into the kitchen, filming anything in our home that could possibly be incriminating.

"You, Devil Girl, are in big trouble for what you did to me," Devendra says. Mom One gives me a questioning look.

"What did she do?" asks Mom Two.

"It was horrible, absolutely horrible, you must understand." The news reporter continues in her put-upon voice: "We happened to be in the area when we witnessed little Arugula here escape from Two Shoes. We saw her at the playground, so we said to get in the van little dearie, and we won't take you back to that awful place, we'll take you to Mommy and… Mommy. But she said, no, she wanted to go back home. To her *real* home."

My moms exchange a look. I may be a Devil Girl, but I'm not a liar. And they know that Devendra pushed the story in the *Kansas Morning Star* about them, how their lifestyle made them as good as the devil, that my acquisition was all a part of their master plan to ensure all households become two-mom households.

"You're sure?" says Mom One.

"Sure as praline pie on Sundays." She laughs. The reporter lifts up her sleeve, revealing two bleeding bite marks. She winces as she does it, looking away from the source of the pain for added effect. But my moms bend closer. It looks nothing like the kind of bites I leave on things. They have the shape of a vampire bat's puny fangs, not the equipped incisors belonging to a Devil Girl. And anyway, the blood is starting to smudge and smear against her skin, resembling lipstick more than residue from a vicious wound.

"What do you want from us?" says Mom Two.

"I don't understand," says Devendra. The cameraman zooms in.

My moms pull me closer, and we face the camera looking like any other kind of family because we love each other just as much as anyone else loves their own.

"We're just a good, wholesome family, just like everybody else!" my moms say. "You know we don't mean any harm."

"Nonsense!" says the reporter. "I understand you may feel that way, Mrs. and Mrs.... uh... Moms. But as a journalist, it is my responsibility to uncover the truth. The *whole* truth."

In the past couple days, I've come to understand a thing or two about truth and lies, about good and bad. I don't think it is as clear-cut as they make it seem at Saint Lilith School or at Two Shoes. There are some exceptions to being good all the time, I think. There is some use to being bad.

"Moms?" I say, looking up at them with the eyes of a Devil Girl who's learned a whole lot.

"Yes?" they say in unison.

"When you talk like that, you're letting them win."

And then I unhinge my hellmouth, my tongue unfurling like a snake, curling out the door, down the driveway, until it reaches inside the van, and I grasp my flail, snapping the tongue back like a retractable ruler. I swing the spikes on its unruly ball and chain, over my head, energy and passion coursing through me again. This is who I really am. This is how I like to play. The cameraman drops his equipment and runs off, cracking the camera lens on the kitchen tile.

"Please," begs Devendra. She gets down on her knees. Her eyes are wild, ringed with dripping mascara, and now, I can see

from up close, still filled with hate.

"We can just pretend this never happened," she says, her mauve lipstick pursed pleadingly. "Really—our footage is destroyed. Just—*please*—don't hurt me."

My moms each place a hand on my shoulder. With pained pleasant smiles, they say,

"Have a nice day, Ms. Moody."

"Oh, bless you! Thank you!" The wayward reporter hoists herself from the floor, reaffixes her single heel shoe, and breaks for the door.

"Moms?" I say, questioning. Why do they still insist on being so nice?

"We don't care if you're never Good, little Arugula," says Mom One.

Mom Two adds, "But just like you, some humans will never be truly Good in their hearts, either. And we still ought to treat them with kindness. It's called Being the Bigger Person."

"Being the Bigger Person," I repeat. "Starting now?"

"Starting now."

Just then, we hear a scream come from our front doorstep. The guttural, grinding sound of a portal to Hell opening up, the tentacles tugging Ms. Devendra Moody down by her nest hair. She disappears under our doorstep, and when the portal closes, all that remains is her set of mauve press-on nails from gripping onto the earth, now delicately placed on our welcome mat that reads "Welcome Home."

"Starting *now*," I say.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Given that Arugula is a devil girl, is it wrong to try and teach her to "play nice" the way humans play? Is it wrong to try and change how she likes to play given that she was born with the desire to play differently?
2. The moms argue that Arugula should treat people with kindness, even though she will never have a good heart. What does this mean and how can we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory statements?
3. Arugula says, "I like how my moms show me love no matter what." Is this statement enough to show that Arugula will, over time, become loving? Is receiving unconditional love all that is needed to develop empathy and love in another person or does it require more?
4. Reporter Devendra Moody is the story antagonist, but is she wrong in her actions? Is it wrong for Ms. Moody to act on her sincere belief that Arugula is a danger to the community?
5. How is the discrimination against the two moms and the discrimination against Arugula similar and dissimilar in their practice and societal justifications?

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Amazing Times at the Pub Agora

John Douglas Mullen

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo, Strong Language

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It's too early for the bar regulars and quiet enough so you could hear that little squeak from the ceiling fan. I love these times, me with my friendly bar rag, relaxed, wiping glasses, and thinking of nothing.

The pub's empty, except for me and him. I'd say the guy's early forties, grease under his nails and ground into his fingers, corduroy pants, black tee, leather jacket, rumpled hair escaping from under his cap, a "newsboy" cap, I think they call it. He's quietly sitting at the bar, drinking a beer from a narrow cocktail glass.

But then this other guy comes in. He's got small round glasses, you know, like that famous guy John Lemon always had on. I think that's the name. Anyway, he's got a suit on and a white shirt and a loose tie pulled off to the side like he was pissed when

he loosened it and gave it a yank. The guy looks soft, not fat, but kind of like dough, like he never did a day of hard work. And his face is oily moist, or maybe it's sweat, I don't know. He's probably forty or so, but his hair's going fast and he's plastered a few of the remaining strands over its top, like no one would notice. When I see that, I always think of Super Glue.

Anyway, he sits two stools from the quiet one and he's turning, looking around, like he doesn't want to face me or doesn't know what to do.

I say, "What can I get you there, Jack?"

He says, "Huh, oh, um, a whiskey, I guess."

I say, "Scotch, Irish, Canadian?"

"Scotch."

"Neat?"

"Huh?"

"Will you have ice, sir," I say.

"Yes please."

Like a kid when his mother offers jelly with his peanut butter, "Yes please." I plunk a double in front of him with a glass of ice beside it. He seems confused, picks up the double shot, inspects it, and gives me a look like, "What's this?"

Then the silent guy, eyes fixed on his beer, speaks.

"It's a double shot of scotch. Dump it on the ice and drink it."

"Huh? Oh, sure."

I think, "Cripes, what's that?" Little did I know.

He pours the scotch into the ice, then throws the double down without waiting for it to cool. His face turns bright red and he forces his mouth shut to keep from gasping.

The silent guy says to me, "Give my friend here a beer."

To Mr. Funny Glasses, the guy, he says, and I remember it exactly,

"Take at least twenty minutes to finish the beer and tell me what the fuck you're doing here."

The guy exhales, coughs, and says, "Why should I do that?"

"Because you've got something in your craw and want someone to talk to. That's why you're here and my friend there behind the bar? Not much of a talker."

I'm thinking he's right about that but who's he, a shrink? Just as I think that, Mr. Spectacles says, "What do you do anyway? I mean, you going to psychoanalyze me or something?"

"Psychoanalyze you? Why? You got some deep, hidden story cleverly packed away somewhere you can't get at?"

"I don't think so."

"Neither do I, but if you did, it wouldn't interest me. So why don't you just spit it out."

The guy says, "You're a pushy bastard."

"Yah, I've heard that said."

The guy sips a couple of times, very small sips, and then says, "Well, there's this woman."

"Isn't there always? What woman?"

"At work."

"Ring says you're married. You having sex with this woman?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Usually for about—"

"Not that 'how long.' How long have you two been bopping each other?"

"You needn't put it… half a year more or less."

"How many kids do you have and how old?"

"Three boys. They're eleven, fifteen, and, let's see, seventeen, I think."

"Who knows about this woman?"

"Just a couple of buddies."

"They your cheerleaders?"

"What?"

"You know, slapping your back and telling you what a stud you are."

"Uh, I guess."

"Little wifey getting it on too? Maybe with one of your buds?"

"Of course not."

"Did you actually say, 'Of course not?'"

"Well, I—"

"Forget it. What's your problem?"

So, I'm listening to all this with my mouth hanging open. I'm thinking, why's this guy asking all these questions? And why is the little guy answering them? But the quiet one listens so hard his eyes seem bolted on the other guy's face. He really wants to know, or he seems to. Most people really don't give a shit what someone says. It's like, "How ya doing?"

"Well, my dog died today and my mother's just hanging on."

"And the wifey? She good too?"

But not this guy. He listens. And the little guy really is in some kind of trouble. Anyway, that's how it seemed.

"What's my problem? You mean with the woman?"

"Who else?"

"Well, that's just it. It should bother me, but it doesn't. I mean I love my wife. My kids are great. We have a good life, all of us. Everybody gets along."

"So?"

"Well, I think I should feel guilty."

"Are you guilty?"

"No, I don't feel guilty at all."

"I know you don't feel guilty, you told me that already. I asked, are you guilty."

"I don't get it."

"Look, a guy walks into his neighbor's house; picks up a kitchen knife; stabs the neighbor to death then saunters away whistling 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand.' Is he guilty of murder?"

"Sure."

"Does he feel guilty?"

"Apparently not."

"You don't feel guilty but are you guilty?"

"I guess… I mean, yes, I am."

"What are you guilty of? What wrong have you committed and against whom?

"That's it too. I haven't hurt anyone. Me and this woman, we're just enjoying ourselves. No promises. No future. And no one else knows, well, except a couple of my buddies. No one's getting hurt. How can it be wrong if nobody's hurt?"

Quiet man says, "Well now, my not-so-good man, that's an interesting question."

"What?"

"This: Can a person commit a wrong against another without making that person worse off?

Mr. Spectacles says, "I never thought of that."

Quiet guy says, "Yeah well, I'm not surprised. But tell me, what's your mother's mother's name?"

"My grandmother?"

"One of them, yeah."

"Susan."

"I assume she's passed on. Where did she grow up?"

"In Shahneen, in Ireland."

Quiet one says, "Well, suppose I go to Shahneen tomorrow, here some people still remember Susan, and I whisper the news through the pubs that Susan came to the States and became a streetwalker. Did tricks in alleyways for peanuts and died of VD."

"Christ!"

"Of course, the good folks in Shahneen have a grand old time passing around that tidbit about Grandma, you know, 'And she was such a nice little girl.' 'I always knew those big tits would get her in trouble.' Things like that. Am I guilty of a wrong?"

"You destroyed her reputation."

"Does she know that? Come on. Be honest."

"No."

"Has she felt anything negative, any pain or sorrow from what I did?"

"No."

"Have I done her a wrong?"

"Yes. You spread lies about her. People will laugh when they talk about her, no longer respect her."

"So, even though I affected Susan not at all in any physical or emotional way, I did her a wrong?"

"I guess."

"You guess? Got an ounce of conviction inside that bald—"

"Okay… I've… I done wrong."

"Even though your wife feels no ill effects? Let's assume that's true—that she feels no ill effects—though it's unlikely."

"Why's it unlikely? I told you she doesn't know. She hasn't been hurt at all."

"Can a person feel ill effects from cancer while not knowing she has cancer? You've brought a cancer into your family. You think you haven't changed the world she lives in?"

"I guess… I mean, I have."

"Done wrong to your wife?"

"Yes."

"You are guilty?"

"But I've never felt guilty."

"We've been through that! This isn't about your stunted emotional growth. You made yourself into a liar and a cheat. You've risked the family life that your children and your wife love, something that their happiness relies on. What else are you, but guilty?"

"Okay, okay, but how do I change it?"

"You mean how do you get out from being a liar, a cheat, a bad husband, and a bad father? How do you become a good man? The way out is the same as the way in. You decided to be what you are now. Only decisions from you can undo that."

"Like what?"

"Step one's obvious. The other woman, give her a pat on her cheating little fanny and send her on her way."

The cheater says, "I'm the one who cheated. She's single. She didn't cheat."

Quiet guy, "Wrong again, but that's for another time."

The other guy says, "I feel better."

"I don't care how you feel. You're the one in the wrong here. You don't deserve to feel good until you set it right."

"I mean I understand it now."

At this point, I think it's over, the guy admits his guilt, will ditch his cheating friend, the glass is in his hands. I already recognize that look. The smart guy's thinking, so there's more to come, maybe even the best part.

The quiet guy says, "You understand it now? You think because someone, some stranger, finally tells you you're guilty, that it's over, nothing left to understand?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said earlier no one got hurt by your little stepping out. What about you, did you get hurt?"

"Me? No, I don't… well unless you call great sex getting hurt. Ha!"

Quiet guy says, "When exactly did you decide to make it your life's work to be a creep?"

The cheater, "That's not—"

"Never mind. Tell me. Do your boys respect you?"

"Sure."

"How do they show it?"

"Why? What's that got to do—"

"Just tell me."

"Well, let's see. They ask my advice. They tell me what they've accomplished. They brag about me. Tell people what a good dad I am."

"This respect makes you feel good, think more highly of yourself?"

"I guess. It makes me feel important like I'm someone special."

"Do your children know who you are?"

"Of course they do. I'm their father."

"They know you're kind to them and you're smart. They know you can't shoot hoops worth a shit and you throw a ball like your grandma, Susan."

"How'd you know that?"

"I'm a philosopher. Anything they don't know that could change whether they respect you?"

"I don't think… ah, you mean the woman?"

"Bingo. You've held out on them. You bask in the respect you think you have from them. In fact, they are not giving that respect to you at all."

"I just told you—"

"They're giving their respect to the person they think you are. They don't respect you, the person who, among other things, is a liar and cheat and willing to threaten their happiness just to get laid. When you did that, you became another person, a cheat who doesn't care enough about them to do the right thing. Their respect is for the man you were (or may have been), not the one you are."

The cheater finally gets angry. "So they need to know everything about me before they can respect me?"

"They don't need to know how many hairs you're pretending to have on the top of your shiny bald head. But to respect the real you, the person you really are, they sure as hell have to know if this father of theirs is a liar and a cheat."

"Christ."

The quiet guy says, "It will never be you they respect until you make it right."

"How?"

"You know the answer. You chose to make yourself who you are. Choose again, this time to get back to who you were."

"Should I tell them?"

"If you need to. But the main thing is to mark this day in your calendar and start doing the right thing. You'll know when you deserve their respect and, by the way, your wife's love."

Mr. Spectacles takes off his glasses and wipes them with a paper napkin. I think for a minute he's gonna cry. Then he says, "Shit, do I pay you or something?"

"Put a Punk on the tab for me then go straighten yourself out."

After the baldie guy leaves, I say, "What the hell was that?"

He says, "Just a little conversation. He was confused. I helped him out."

I say, "You called yourself a philosopher. Are you? I never met a philosopher."

"Well, now you have."

I say, "You don't look like a philosopher."

"Should I wear my tweeds next time I come in for a Punk?"

"What do they do, I mean philosophers?"

"They do what I just did. Get underneath things, where the confusions or mistakes come from. Try to straighten some things out."

I say, "I never thought of any of those things you asked him."

He says, "And I can't mix a daiquiri."

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The philosopher asserts a person can commit a wrong against another without making that person worse off. Do you agree with the statement? Can you think of a counterexample to disprove this statement?
2. What if the confidence and experience the cheating man gets from his extramarital affair makes him a more attentive and confident husband? Is a wrong still a wrong, even if there are secondary benefits?
3. The philosopher says another wrong is the cheating man's boys are giving their respect to the person they think he is. Under this framework, to what degree do parents have an obligation to divulge their good and bad life history to their children at age-appropriate times? For example, would a parent be required to tell their children (*at an age-appropriate time*) that he (*regretfully*) punched a homeless person and stole their bike twenty years earlier before they were born?
4. Given that the cheating man came into the bar because he felt bad for not feeling bad, does that mean, deep down, he knew what he was doing was wrong? Or did he come into the bar because he was simply confused about the disconnect between his feelings and societal norms? Does it matter which reason is the correct one?
5. Do you think the story accurately displays what philosophers do? What is the difference between the philosopher in the story and a therapist?

* * *

Prophets

Mason Jeffrey Wageman

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Violence, Strong Language

* * *

Before I left the solar system, I took a walk in the woods behind my house. It was the remains of Superior National Forest, one of the few Class One ecosystems remaining in the world, meaning it could survive without human intervention. Even so, I spent the past sixteen years monitoring the botany and the beetles, noting liabilities and weaknesses in the system, waiting for my intervention to be necessary. My predictions were that it would become Class Two—limited intervention—in twenty years. Conveniently, that's when the human population was predicted to dip below the big red line.

During my pre-launch physical, they found a wood tick on my lower back so bloated that its body was a yellowish-green light bulb. It was an adult male, meaning that after its body reached its blood capacity, all that was left was for it to detach and die. I would have squashed the blood sac with my naked

heel had the doctor not placed it in a vial, a gesture I usually avoid when it comes to life of any kind, though parasites are the one life form that has continued to disgust me through the years.

I was assigned to Glacialis, a small, white-blue planet 2,432 light years away. The promise was in the (likely) high concentration of water on the planet's surface, even though much of it was (likely) frozen. With a planet that far away, our readings could do little more than give us the color of the surface and some spotty weather readings. As scientists, we wanted data, but hope would have to do.

They called us the Prophets because we were desperate enough to resort to religion, or at least the aesthetic of it. We were still scientists, after all. There were fourteen of us when the project formed, assigned to search for the Promised Land in pairs. It became thirteen when, one month before launch, Amos Harding died from drinking contaminated water. According to the reports, he had been ingesting it for weeks without knowing, as they found a flaw in his house's filtration system. His town's reservoir only had six months of water left, meaning the residents all would have died before he could even report his findings, something he was well aware of.

None of the vessels were designed to house three people for the duration of travel, so I volunteered to go alone. The windowless oval meeting room felt heavy and dark that day, and there was a long silence and an army of relieved stares in my direction after I spoke up. All the other Prophets patted my back in thanks, but in truth, I felt lighter knowing I could tackle my mission alone. Collaboration is not an action I do well, as I tend toward explaining and teaching when in the presence of others,

though I am quick to admit it is a flaw of mine. I figured it was better to create an environment where that defect could not show its prickly face when humanity was at stake.

* * *

It took eight months and three light jumps to reach Glacialis. The jumps were instantaneous, covering up to one thousand light years in a blink, but the charging period was the killer, leaving the vessel dormant for up to three months between travel. The jumps also required a landing space near a potent sun, making direct trips impossible for most Prophets. Back when they were called astronauts, when resources were once abundant, there was more than one case of a miscalculation leading to an incendiary demise upon shooting into a target star. I even heard the story of a pilot who perfected his mathematical calculations only to be swallowed by the tentacle of a solar flare during his first charging period. In moments like those, I think we all question whether fate exists or not, if there's some guiding hand that we cannot see. If God is real, I think he's playing with us like dolls, giggling as he rips off our hair and our limbs. I often wish it was the truth; it's less embarrassing than what we atheists are left with—that we fucked ourselves.

When I arrived to Glacialis, I nearly wept. Through the narrow glass of my ship's debris shield, the white-blue planet appeared to be a cinematic image on a diamond-shaped TV screen. The icy blue orb glowed in the depths of a surrounding blackness that I could not name, alive with the radiance of its nearby sun. As I pierced the atmosphere, I was overwhelmed with the cruel majesty of the planet, blind to its decision on whether to swallow or shelter me. Condensation ate at the

diamond-shaped glass, and my breath left my body as the world became bluer. Then, I plunged through the floor of the clouds, and the cold blues and greens of the planet's surface revealed themselves. For a moment, I did not need to breathe because salvation was before me.

The land was a lattice of rivers and streams, some fat boa constrictors, others single strands of hair, all chopping up a lush, green paradise. I sucked in a heavy breath as the g-force racked my body. The metal moaned as the ship fought to level out, and my teeth attempted to puncture each other as I forced my trajectory parallel to the widest, straightest river I could find. I steered directly above the moving water, then I dropped the vessel down. The ship's belly skipped on the water once, twice, then dug in, spraying a dense mist cloud as it slowed.

When the adrenaline faded, and my breathing returned to normal, I began to laugh. The landscape was spotty due to water droplets covering the debris shield, but the rich colors and sprawling limbs of the bank's vegetation convinced me I had been thrust into Eden. As I was trained, I quickly manned my console and typed a message to Earth. *Safe landing,* it read. It would be at least two months before the message arrived. We were also instructed to report any signs of water or life, but I stared at the cursor on my screen blankly. I wanted to be certain of my assertions—that's what I told myself—so I sent nothing more.

The ship rocked on the water as it traversed the river, causing my pen to slash through my journal as I attempted to log my first impressions of the planet. After a few minutes of frantic scribbling, I screwed on my narrow helmet and practiced some deep breathing exercises as my suit calibrated. The thick

garment was a deep gray that seemed to dull the world around it, and it had the aesthetic of an old Air Force pilot, speckled with square pockets, straps, and zippers. The helmet was narrow, well-fitted, and had two bug eyes that stretched from my forehead to my chin as well as ear-to-ear, allowing a wide range of vision.

Once calibrated, I popped the cockpit open, the change in pressure causing a dramatic hiss as the rubber seal unlocked and the glass lifted. I was sure my face was glowing through my helmet's bug eyes as I admired the new world, an infinite smile dominating my features. Star-shaped flowers the size of small trees bobbed on the bank, and dark blue weeds stretched at the flowers' bases. I stepped out of the cockpit and onto the flat body of my ship as I admired the never-ending wall of glaciers on the horizon. In their icy haze, they seemed to be staring back, like gods watching over the land, admiring the flow of their own nectar.

Once I had absorbed the grandeur, I noticed small, furry ovals bobbing in front of the ship's wings, and I froze. Before moving any further, I knelt and pressed a plate on the ship's body, revealing a small compartment with a retractable harness. I clipped the hook around my waist before pulling a thin, metal rod from my hip and extending it to full length. Then, I approached the wing. I squatted and poked one of the furry objects with my rod, and it quickly wriggled beneath the surface, barely disturbing the water. Then, it floated back to the wing, now on its side. Through its white fur, I could make out one bulbous, yellow eye, and a dual-finned, naked tail in its rear. They were fish, I realized. I poked the same sideways creature with my rod, but its limp body did not wriggle this time. I tucked

my rod away and leaned over the rushing water, grabbing the fish with a suited hand. It was like plucking driftwood from the river.

I stroked the white fur of the fish, which ran from its mouth to the base of its tail, then I gently opened its lips with my finger. The mouth of the fish tucked inward naturally, almost like it was hiding its lips, and the line went so deep into the body it seemed to split the head in half. It had two rows of small, sharp teeth that ran deep into its gums, and I could easily make out its pink innards through its throat. It lay completely still in my hands, as did its companions around the wings. I looked behind the ship to see furry white spots poking above the water sporadically. I realized the ship must have killed them upon landing, and perhaps it was a shift in the already-overcast sky, but the world seemed to lose a little color.

As I screwed on the lid of a fish-sized jar, I felt the ship rock slightly, as if someone had tugged on one of the wings. I swiveled my head to the open cockpit, but I was too far into the ship's chambers to see anything but the raised glass. I placed the jarred fish onto the shelf and marched forward through the alley of the ship's body, metal rod already in hand. As I reached the open cockpit, I felt the ship rock again, and as I peered out at the wing, I thought I saw something dip into the water, but I assured myself it was one of the dead fish. Even so, on the right wing, a large puddle previously not there rejoined the river, as if something had tried to climb aboard. I quickly closed the cockpit, resealing the ship's chambers as I watched the wings with vigilant eyes. The glass sealed before I could catch anything else.

* * *

Two years previous, I had been following a small herd of white-tailed deer—three does and one fawn—through Superior National Forest. I was on an assignment to study runoff patterns, and I found my path aligned with the herd, so I began to follow them, perhaps out of affection. At first, I resisted the temptation to name my deer friends, but the spindly fawn had perfect pearl spots on its coat, so after hours of trying not to call him Bambi, I realized the name had already been given. Bambi and his three mothers led me east, toward my own neighborhood, until we were nearly in the open suburbs. I was watching Bambi sip from a narrow stream when a crack pierced the air. I quickly shouldered my pack and began padding quietly toward the sound of the gunshot.

I blamed myself for naming Bambi. I had built a relationship where the only outcome was heartbreak, and although the fawn would go on with two foster parents, I felt like I destined him for loss. The hunter kneeled over the mother with his rifle around his shoulder and a hungry pride on his bearded face. He wore a traditional camo jacket that likely belonged to his grandfather, and his face had muddy green paint smeared on. He looked up at me with shiny eyes when I stepped near enough, a wide grin on his face.

“I’ve never actually hit one,” he laughed. He poked at the felled animal as if it might bite him, then he stroked the fur with a feverish hand.

“You just committed a felony,” I said flatly to the man.

He continued to stroke the deer, my words dissolving around him, failing to touch him. “Can you eat these things?” He stood with a satisfied grunt, still staring at the carcass, then he clicked his tongue. “That’s the kind of stuff I should have asked

my dad."

He turned to look at me again, and I concluded his assessment of me was not positive. His face remained friendly though, just barely.

"He was a smoker," the hunter said. "Lived a few hours north of here. Didn't stand a chance with the clean air shortage."

"I'm going to have to report you," I spoke again, eyeing the rifle sling on his camouflaged shoulder.

The hunter sighed. "Can't I have a little fun before the world ends?"

* * *

After an hour of stillness outside the ship, I reopened the cockpit and harnessed myself to the hull. Using a long oar, I ushered the ship toward the bank, knowing I needed to moor it if I wanted to leave the river. Among the dark blue weeds and man-sized flowers stood albino trees with bark that spiraled around the trunks into sharp, leafless branches aimed toward the clouds. I estimated the arbors would be strong enough to hold the weight of the drifting ship, so I waited until the wing scraped the muddy riverside to hop onto the bank and unclip the harness from my waist. As I stumbled onto the leafy blue foliage, I realized I underestimated the surge of the river, and my ship was traveling much faster than I thought. I hurried to the tree and hugged its stiff body in an attempt to loop the strap around its trunk. I had nearly clipped the harness around when it pulled taut and jerked me into the dirt. Fearing I might lose my ship, I clenched the strap tight with my left hand and winced as my body ripped through the weeds and splashed into the river. The current grabbed me, and I felt the tension in the harness loosen. Using my free hand, I clipped my waist and

swam to my ship's wing. Though the water was muddled with the sediment of its planet, I could make out gaggles of the furry white fish hiding under the cover of umbrella-shaped vegetation with thin stems that stretched from below. I sensed they were avoiding the detection of something larger, but I did not waste time discovering what.

Once I climbed aboard, I sat on the wing of my ship for a moment, my charcoal suit heavy with river water. The ordeal cost two percent of my oxygen tank, which had an estimated two hours remaining, but the air purifiers in the ship were filling another canister as I sat and dripped. Once I checked my suit for damage and felt comfortable enough to try again, I waited until I found a tree near the edge and leaped to the bank once again. I was much quicker, securing the clip with a few seconds to spare. The albino tree moaned as it absorbed the ship's momentum and held back the river, and I watched the metal beast stagnate with a satisfied smile.

That night, I slept with my eyes open, a practice that was mandatory in our training as Prophets. The darkness came quickly, as Glacialis rotated faster than Earth and claimed a smaller circumference, yet it felt more like a gray cloud than a black night. The air was thick and misty, and the hue of the planet resembled something closer to an eclipse rather than a sunless shadow. As such, I could see as far as the bank with no extra light, so I slept with sentry eyes.

I jolted awake when I saw a webbed hand smear the glass of my debris shield. I attempted to blink away my sleepy delirium as I pressed my unhelmed face to the glass. The surface of my ship appeared unoccupied, and the bank undisturbed. The trick in sleeping with open eyes is deciphering which

images are ocular and which are dreamed. I leaned into the pane where the webbed hand had rested, and water dripped down the domed glass. The aquatic appendage had not been imagined.

I relaxed in my seat again, waiting for the creature to reappear. Many minutes passed, and the night remained still. Meanwhile, three pale moons remained visible through the clouds, and I began to sketch the sky in my journal. As I scratched graphite into paper, I felt myself jerk back in my seat, then the harness reel hissed and clanked as it slotted itself back into the ship's body. My vehicle rejoined the flow of the river, and I scrambled to seal my helmet to the neck of my suit. Once fitted, I popped the debris shield, and I looked to the bank to see three bipeds lurking near the tree the ship had been harnessed to. I could not make out their features, but they were tall, slender, and one of them had four arms, giving the appearance of a large insect standing on its hind legs. They lost shape as I drifted away, but they appeared to be motioning to each other frantically with their limbs. They made no noise, though.

Re-mooring the ship would be difficult in the low light, but I figured it was safer than floating into the unknown. I decided I would wait some time to pass the territory of the bipeds, hoping they would leave the ship undisturbed if I accrued some distance. But just as I reached for the harness slot on the surface of my ship, a very small biped crawled onto my wing. Already kneeling, I turned to face the small creature very slowly, careful to remain low and unthreatening. It stood on two legs, like the others, with a lizard tail drooping behind it. It was hardly taller than my knee, and it likely weighed no more than forty pounds, plus it had the insect arms of the (likely) adult I had seen on shore, with three joints and crustacean-like armor

on its forearms. Its head was pointed and sharp, shaped like a spearhead, and it had two narrow eyes that faced forward, but no other features.

The creature tucked one set of limbs into a chest cavity, its armor blending with its torso so it suddenly appeared to only have two arms rather than four. With one of its active limbs, it showed its webbed fingers to me with its palm facing up, almost like a child asking for candy.

"Hello," I said, muffled through my helmet.

The creature flinched, jerking its arm back. We stared at each other, its eyes wide, then slowly, it stretched its arm again. I scooted closer, still on my knees, and the creature remained vulnerable, its arm outstretched. Once it was within reach, I extended my own arm, but just as I was about to make contact, the water exploded next to the wing, and a much larger biped yanked its smaller relative into the water. I was alone again on the wing, but after a moment, the same adult shot up and faced me with arms outstretched and eyes narrowed. In two of its hands were rough-edged blades the size of my forearms, carved from some type of stone. I resisted the instinct to reach for the rod at my hip, and instead, from my kneeling position, I turned my palm upward and stretched it to the biped, just as the smaller one had done. I slowly stood to my full height, and I clenched my teeth in anticipation of the oncoming slash to my exposed limb, but none came. The pointed head of the creature reached only to my shoulders, and its eyes faced my chest. It stared upward into my helmet, its glare still suspicious, but morphing into curiosity. It sheathed its blades into a waistband crafted from old vines, then it tucked its center limbs into its chest before reaching an upper limb out to mine. Though I could not

feel it through my suit, the skin of the creature seemed rubbery and frog-like as it laid its palm on mine. We let our hands rest there, and for a moment I thought we were glowing in the dark. When it pulled its hand back, the creature began waving its arms and fingers at me in intricate, practiced motions. It reminded me of sign language. It would move in short bursts and pause to see if I understood.

"I can't tell what you're saying," I attempted to explain.

Again, the creature flinched, bringing its arms close to its torso.

Instead of speaking again, I made an exaggerated shrugging motion, and I wiggled my fingers lazily to display my lack of dexterity. The biped eyed me for a moment, then it reached for the ship's harness and pulled it from the slot. It mocked looping the strap around a trunk and securing the clip. With one of its free hands, it flashed an open palm, facing me, then a fist. "Yes or no," seemed to be the cadence of the motion, so I replied with an open hand, like I was saying "hi." Immediately, it dove into the water and popped onto the bank in an instant, clip in hand, then it quickly found a trunk and secured the harness. It appeared I had made a friend.

* * *

I had been told once that I could benefit from making friends. It's difficult to argue when the person telling you is stroking your hair while her thighs cradle your head. Her name was Sherry, and she was short, stubborn, and permanently bespectacled with rose glasses.

Before she branded the words "cold" and "inhuman" onto my brain flesh, Sherry had convinced me people were worthwhile.

"I hate us," I once told her as I paced around the kitchen, searching for my cinnamon shaker. I had no designated spice drawer because my diet consisted mainly of salad and cereal. "I hate that we step on ants, I hate that we fight wars, I hate that we imprison each other."

Sherry sat at my granite counter, watching me with the eyes of a lover. I promised I would cook the entire meal that night, for better or for worse.

"What are you looking for?" she asked gently.

"Cinnamon."

"We don't have cinnamon."

"Yes, we do."

I opened and closed another drawer, my teeth grinding.

"Just use nutmeg," she suggested.

Without acknowledging she was right, I found the nutmeg next to the brown sugar, and I continued on my rant. "People say we act like animals, but we act *worse* than animals. They do bad shit to survive. We do bad shit for fun." I shook the nutmeg into a small ceramic bowl already full of flour and sugar. "Sometimes I wish I was part of a different species. I'd be a wood tick if I had to."

Sherry giggled. "You sound like you hate people, but I know you don't."

I turned from my baking task and eyed her with skepticism. "How do you know that?"

"Because you love *me*," she grinned.

Sherry died from malnutrition two years after we broke up, and I often wish it had hurt more. Sometimes, all you can do is shrug and move on.

* * *

I stayed awake the rest of the night, attempting to learn the biped language. It was easiest to use what was around us. I learned the signs for tree, river, water, flower, weeds, and eventually some action words such as walking, running, and swimming. I recorded it all in my journal, though many of the drawings proved difficult to read due to my artistic ineptitude. The language puzzled me with its complexity, as single words could have as many as four distinct motions, and given that my vocal cords frightened the native species, I had very few tools to communicate in return.

Because the Glacialans became more active in the dark (what I called dim), I assumed them to be nocturnal, meaning I would need to assimilate to that schedule if I was to learn more about them. I darkened my cabin by pulling the sun cover over the debris shield, but a green light blinked at me from the console. It was the cursor for my messaging software. I leaned over the keypad and typed out four different strings before deleting them all. The cursor continued to blink. *Water discovered on planet's surface. Unsure if habitable.* Those were the words I decided on because they were technically true. I would say more when I was certain.

After two months, I had enough information to write a textbook on the Glacialans and enough stories to write a novel, but I had not contacted Earth about any of it. Instead, I filled four separate journals with notes on the language, and I practiced forming expressions with my fingers and limbs every day, becoming a nearly proficient speaker.

The Glacialans proved to be a shy, peaceful people. For the first few days, my initial friend, who I would name Bullfrog, was the only one to make contact with me. He continued to

teach me signs, and he brought me raw fish and wet greens, which I jarred and refrigerated in the ship's cabin. When we shared our names, my friend made a horizontal fist and hopped it across his chest, like a bullfrog. I smiled behind my helmet and repeated the motion. Bullfrog shook his hands in excitement, sort of like he was ridding them of water.

"Ezekiel," I said to him. He still flinched a little when I spoke, but he had grown much more accustomed to my vocality than in the beginning. I then drew a *Z* in the air with my right index finger—the translation for the letter in American Sign Language. I had forgotten how to sign an *E*.

Bullfrog returned the gesture, and I copied his hand-shaking to show I was gleeful. I learned that the Glacialans showed almost all their emotion through their hands, as they lacked the distinct facial features of humans. This added another layer of complexity to their language, as emotions and words were combined into single movements.

Only a few days after Bullfrog initially strapped my ship to the bank, he took my hand and placed it on the braided bark. Through the thick canvas of my suit, I could tangibly feel very little, but the gesture seemed incredibly important to him. His hand gestures were timid, but wise, even though I understood very little of what he was saying. He then pulled the strap and revealed the wound it had carved into the tree, dulling the braids to a flat, shredded surface. I placed my hand there as well, and I held it for longer than I expected. Bullfrog had all four hands upon the organism with eyes loosely closed.

We found a dead tree further down the river well-rooted and firm enough that we attached the ship to it, but I could sense in Bullfrog's body language that he was still grieving. I wondered

if he felt responsible for the damage to the tree. I worried I would lose contact with him, but he appeared to me the next night, and the next, and the next, always with a curious spirit.

After six nights, I revealed my face to Bullfrog as we stood on the bank. The air purity tests my ship had been running deemed the oxygen clean, information I did not report to Earth. The Glacialan gawked at my pale, fleshy features, both sets of bug-arms clutched close to his torso. With my helmet in one hand, I took my free one and touched my eyes, signing what Bullfrog had taught me when he once pointed to his own.

Without extending his arms, he moved his webbed fingers like crawling spiders. The absent-minded gesture meant he felt uncomfortable. I responded with the sign "sorry," then we continued with our intercultural exchange as usual, my friend still wary of my appearance. I would be lying if I claimed that Bullfrog's reaction did not hurt me at all.

I met more of the Glacialans as the days passed. Whitebark, Joy, Rivertooth, and eventually Bullfrog Jr., the child who initially greeted me on the wing of my ship. I learned the name of the body of water we lived on—Big River, which made me wish I had the language to explain the Rio Grande to my friends. We walked along the riverbank with the manflowers and pointed albino trees. I showed them the inside of my ship, and they revealed their underwater abodes to me after nearly one month.

The Glacialans burrowed into the muddy, underwater bank of the river, as low as they could. The holes acted as doorways, for once one swam inside, they would quickly resurface in a carefully constructed cave. Upon my first entrance, my helmet nearly scraped the ceiling of the abode as

I crawled from the water portal. The caverns were much darker than the dim night, and the air even sparser than the surface. For those reasons, my suit was always donned when underground with them.

They took me to what I believed to be a public quarter, as nearly ten Glacialans hovered around the cave, some sitting in social circles, others standing and conversing. They all froze as I emerged from the water in my alien suit. I was careful not to use the helmet's floodlights nor make any vocalizations, but I watched them through my suit's infrared sensors, displayed directly in front of my helmed eyes.

Once Bullfrog introduced me with his charismatic expressions, they all encircled me, eager to touch the fabric and glass of my space garments. Many of them seemed young, though older than Bullfrog Jr., and I noted the public space might be a school or daycare of sorts.

I observed the Glacialans as they hunted the furry white fish. Their arrow-heads and webbed hands and thick lizard tails made them incredibly nimble and dangerous swimmers. They captured the fish with their bare hands, then they filleted them inside their caves with the same blades Bullfrog had threatened me with on my first night.

I helped them collect river greens, a slow and diligent process that required patience and a keen eye. The plants they pulled from were thick, leafy bushes that bent to the flow of the river. The difficulty was in finding the ripe leaves and harvesting them without hurting the plant. One wanted yellow speckles, but not yellow spots. The leaf couldn't be entirely green either.

When dining, the Glacialans ate sparingly, their diet

correlative to their wiry limbs. I noticed children were often punished for serving themselves too large a portion, whether it be through scolding or reduction of food. In addition, the adults always ate less than the children, with the exception of punishment.

After three months on the new planet, I had met nearly the entire Glacialian community of Big River, or rather the section of Big River I had stumbled upon. Then, I received a message from Earth. The connection was firmly established by then, so messages were expedited and shared much quicker as a result.

You are 1 of 3 discovered planets with water. Humanity is in your hands.

Shortly after was another message: *Please report probability of sustained life on Glacialis. Urgent.*

I did not see the messages until the sun had risen and the Glacialans were asleep. My circadian rhythm had yet to sync to the shortened days and nights, and I felt half-awake as I typed my response. I fell asleep before sending it, and when I woke, it felt as though a specter had drafted the words for me.

Probability of survival: <1% — Life unsustainable. It has been a pleasure serving you.

I begged for the strength to hold the delete button until the message was invisible. I hoped the memory of it might mingle with my dreams and dissipate after I had fully woken, but I could not even manage to touch the console.

In the Old Testament, the prophets did little more than warn their people. I imagine they lived rather tortured lives, divinely aware of the coming destruction yet entirely powerless to it. I wonder if they would have stopped it if they could, even

though they lived in a supposedly unclean civilization. I wonder if they would have killed their people to save a better one—one with respect for God. I suppose we invented him so we would never have to make those decisions.

And yet, there it was, blinking on my console in green light. I told myself anyone could have been assigned to Glacialis, and yet I was. I told myself I could have had a partner to talk to me off the precipice, but I had none. Although I had never believed in fate, I suddenly felt like a holy ray of light had struck me, and if any other pair of hands ought to have been commanding that console, they would have been. I sat for a period that I considered far too long considering the ease at which the decision was made, then I hit enter.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Should it matter that sentient life already exists on Glacialis, or should that be irrelevant?
2. If it turns out all planets that support multicellular life eventually give rise to sentient life, does that mean Earth should refuse to colonize the galaxy of habitable planets?
3. The Glacialans the narrator met proved to be a shy, peaceful people. Would your opinion regarding planet colonization be different if the Glacialans he met were vicious, warlike people with cruel and barbaric customs? Why or why not?
4. What if the traits that caused humanity to destroy the Earth's environment are the very traits that gave humans the drive to invent interplanetary travel? If nature favors aggression, consumption, and species spread, how can it be wrong?
5. Do you think it is more unethical for the narrator to lie and save the Glacialans from colonization, or tell the truth, as he knew his job required when he accepted it, and allow the leaders of Earth to decide what happens next?

* * *

The Changed Man

Richard Zwicker

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

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DA Carolina Soares took a seat in the filled courtroom. Middle age and fatigue had barely diminished her dark, attractive face. She had mixed feelings about *The People v. Jason Turner*, something she did not want when doing her job. On the surface, the case was open and shut. Eight months ago, a drug-addled Jason Turner shot and killed Tariq Lari during a robbery. Six months later, Turner surrendered to the police and confessed. Turner's lawyer Angus Beetleman would dispute none of this. The area of contention would be the personality adjustment conducted on Turner in the interim. The defense would claim its client was a changed man, and therefore not responsible for the crime.

Soares was going through her own struggles about people changing. Last month her husband Gustavo admitted to a year-long affair, throwing her marriage into the impersonal hands of

divorce lawyers. Gustavo insisted *she*, not he, had changed as a result of her demanding career. “I’m not the one who broke his vows,” she said, but then, maybe she had. After two children, now both in college, did she still cherish and love her husband? Certainly not in the same way. Everyone changes, but that doesn’t absolve them of their responsibilities. The defense would argue it did, so it was not a surprise to Soares when it chose Nathanael Corzine as its first witness. She willed herself to be the best person to win the case.

“Please state your profession,” Beetleman said to the man in the witness seat. Beetleman wore a natty, expensive-looking gray suit, which obscured his short, dumpy body. His black curly hair had the uniform snarl of a poodle’s fur. Corzine looked about fifty, with gray hair, a trim beard, and a soft, nonathletic body.

“I’m a PA, a personality adjuster,” Corzine said as clearly as a documentary film narrator. Corzine had made a name for himself as a tireless proponent of criminal rehabilitation through PA, a procedure he had spearheaded. Once a regular presence at protests against punitive incarceration, more recently he devoted his time to his operation. Though laws limited the degree of personality adjustment he could do on individual clients, the financial rewards had been significant.

“Could you tell the court exactly what a PA does?” asked Beetleman.

“I change people’s psychological traits,” said Corzine.

“And why would anyone hire you to do that?”

“We are all a mix of traits. I am able to increase the positive traits and diminish the negative ones.”

The lawyer paced slowly in front of the audience.

"Sounds interesting. If my teenage son were failing all his classes, could you do anything for him?"

"I could increase his motivation. If that was the reason he was doing poorly in school, his performance would improve."

"That's amazing. It sounds as if you can totally change who a person is."

"Objection! That's not what he said." Soares's smooth Brazilian accent rolled off her words despite three decades in America.

"I'll rephrase," said Beetleman. He stood directly in front of Corzine. "In your opinion, can you change a murderer into a law-abiding citizen?"

"It depends. I'm restricted by what I have to work with. I'm not sure I could change Jack the Ripper into Jack the Gardener, but I'd be willing to try."

"Did you operate on the defendant, Jason Turner?"

"Yes."

"Whose idea was that?"

Corzine shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Turner's. At first, I refused, but he threatened my family if I didn't cooperate. Despite my lack of choice, I later came to see this as an opportunity to show the world the benefits of PA."

"Could you, in layman's terms, explain what you did for the defendant?"

"I took away his aggression, his addiction to controlled substances, and his low self-esteem. I replaced them with increased empathy, faith, and altruism."

"Was the operation a success?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe Jason Turner will ever again commit a

crime?" asked Beetleman.

"No, unless he had another treatment that reintroduced his negative traits."

"Would you say the Jason Turner in this courtroom is a different man from the Jason Turner who committed murder and escaped from prison?"

"I would."

"Objection!" said Soares. "Leading the witness!"

"Objection sustained," said the stolid-faced elderly judge. "Strike the witness's response from the record. Mr. Beetleman, watch yourself."

Beetleman said he had no more questions and sat down next to Turner, who watched the proceeding with curiosity. Soares rose and faced the witness.

"Mr. Corzine, it's a pleasure to meet you. I've read many of your essays on prison reform. In recent years, however, it seems personality adjusting has eclipsed your career as a reformer, at least in terms of writing and protesting. How much did you earn last year as a PA?"

"It's hard to say. I have an accountant who manages my affairs."

"Would *in excess of a million dollars* be a conservative estimate?"

Corzine coughed. "You'd have to ask my accountant."

"I would, but I'm sure you keep him or her busy. Let's talk about what *you* do. I'm not an expert on personality adjustment, but from what you've told the court, it seems to be a very powerful procedure. Almost too good to be true. Can you tell me why we don't just operate on every single ax-murderer, rapist, arsonist, and extortionist currently in jail and turn them

into meek, bingo-playing members of a church guild?"

Corzine smiled as if he expected the question. "My profession is controversial. Many believe we have no right to change a person's personality."

"Many believe it's a sin to gamble or that social networking is the end of private life as we know it, but those things are still allowed, as is PA. So I repeat, why don't you just change the personality of all prisoners?"

"I could if funds could be found to pay me. It's not a simple procedure. Plus, there are legal limits to the changes I can make."

"What are those limits?"

"The government has adopted an evaluation scale, where a person's pre-op personality is rated at one hundred percent, based on emotions, memories, abilities—everything that contributes to personality. That cannot be changed by more than a factor of ten percent."

Soares folded her arms. "That doesn't seem like much. Since I left law school, I've probably changed more than that without your expensive procedure. What I don't understand is how can you say Jason Turner is a different person as a result of your work if, according to law, he's still ninety percent the same person?"

"Because in the case of Jason Turner, I made changes in excess of ten percent."

Soares hesitated. "You broke the law."

"As I said, he threatened to kill me."

"So we can add intent to murder to the resume of the man attorney Beetleman thinks we should release." She didn't want to ask the next question but if she didn't, Beetleman would.

"What percent would you say you changed Jason Turner's personality?" she asked.

"One hundred percent," Corzine said.

* * *

In the following days, Beetleman interrogated the owner of a produce supply company, for whom Turner drove a delivery truck, and a cook in the soup kitchen where Turner volunteered three nights a week, as well as a neighbor. All praised the defendant as honest, dependable, and affable. Soares didn't have many questions for these witnesses, other than to confirm that Turner had lied about his name and kept his past a secret.

The prosecution, unable to find anyone since Turner's adjustment with a negative word to say about him, focused on his past. Soares called the former warden of the prison Turner had spent time in, Turner's cellmate, and the widow of Tariq Lari. They spoke of a dangerous, amoral man who should be locked up forever.

This relentless negativity left Turner shaken. At the start of a recess, in a voice loud enough for Soares to hear, he asked Beetleman, "How can they find me *not guilty*?"

"Soares needs to tie that person to you. We'll make sure she can't," Beetleman answered.

* * *

During Turner's direct examination, Beetleman asked questions that demonstrated his client's changed nature. On the courtroom widescreen, he showed a picture of the man who murdered the pharmacist. That man had wild, shoulder-length hair, bushy eyebrows, and a drooping mustache. A smirk disfigured his mouth and an unfocused gaze suggested

intoxication. The contrast between that and the Jason Turner in the courtroom couldn't have been starker. The long hair was now short and thinning, his face clean-shaven, his eyebrows trimmed. Perhaps the biggest difference was the eyes, which appeared to be searching and kind.

"Mr. Turner, why did you force Dr. Corzine to operate on you?" asked Beetleman.

Turner grimaced. "Part of me wanted to avoid prosecution. However, I was also tired of not being in control of my life. I didn't want to be a thief and a drug addict, but I couldn't help myself. I saw the PA operation as my last chance."

Beetleman nodded. "What purpose do you believe would be served if you were returned to prison?"

"I understand the anger and frustration of those who knew and loved Tariq Lari. If I am found guilty, I will, of course, serve my sentence. That said, I don't believe years of incarceration would have a positive effect on my rehabilitation. My only wish is to make the world a better place. If I have to do that inside a prison, so be it, but I can do much more good outside."

"How?"

"As a positive role model, as someone who fully understands the consequences of criminal activity for the perpetrator, the victim, and society."

"Could you be more specific?" Beetleman asked.

"I volunteer at a soup kitchen. I run an anonymous blog where I give encouragement and advice to ex-convicts." He paused. "I go to church on Sundays."

Beetleman thanked the defendant. With a slight smile, he turned to Soares. "Your witness."

Soares rose slowly from her seat.

"Mr. Turner, do you remember murdering Mr. Lari?"

"I'll never forget it," Turner said.

"It seems to me, defense is basing its case on the idea that you—as you are now—did not commit the crime. So, despite the alterations made on you, your memory of the event is unchanged."

"As far as I can tell."

"Do you remember why you committed the crime?"

"I needed money. I wasn't thinking of the future. I hadn't planned on hurting anyone."

"Would it be correct to say while your memory of the event was unchanged by the procedure, your view of it today has been?" asked Soares.

"Yes. I no longer see things as I did then."

"Would you say that today everything you do is rational?"

"No. I'm just less likely to do something negative because I am a less negative person. Today I am aware of the effects my actions have on others and I can sympathize."

"So you understand why friends and relatives of Mr. Lari would like to see you pay for your crime."

"Yes."

Soares gave Turner a long look. He met her eyes, smiling wanly.

"Your fingerprints and your memories are the same as the person who murdered an innocent man," she said. "You said you go to church on Sundays. Do you believe you have a soul?"

"I do."

"Do you believe the soul you have today and the soul you had when you killed Tariq Lari are separate?"

The courtroom was silent. “I’m still trying to understand what a soul is,” said Turner.

Soares nodded. “Is it your belief that you and the murderer of Tariq Lari are separate people, in the same way you and I are separate people?”

Turner hesitated. “I guess that’s for the court to decide.”

Soares let his answer hang in the air. “Prosecution rests.”

It was late in the afternoon. The judge dismissed everyone for the day in preparation for closing statements.

* * *

The next morning, Beetleman addressed the court.

“In any criminal case, we are faced with questions. In *The People v. Jason Turner*, many of the basic questions were answered before the trial began. Someone named Jason Turner killed Tariq Lari during the commission of a robbery. Someone named Jason Turner forced Dr. Corzine to conduct an illegal PA operation. I submit to you that someone *else* named Jason Turner sits before you today. We’d like every murderer to pay for his or her crime. In this case, that is not possible. Jason Turner, murderer, no longer exists. We could send Jason Turner, a sympathetic man who wishes nothing but the best for everyone, to prison in his place, but what would that accomplish? It wouldn’t rehabilitate him, for this Jason Turner has done nothing wrong. It might appease those who cry for justice, just as sending anyone to prison for the crime might appease. But I would hope we are beyond the days when police, unable to come up with the perpetrator, round up the usual suspects. I think the overarching question in this trial is what is the purpose of prison? To rehabilitate? This man *is* rehabilitated. Is it to keep a dangerous man off the street? This man poses no

danger to anyone. Is it to feed our lust for an eye for an eye? The court is supposed to be the one place where we evaluate people and their acts rationally in an unbiased manner. An eye for an eye is a negative, destructive desire. It is particularly out of place in evaluating Jason Turner, who doesn't have a negative or destructive thought in his head. We need good men, now more than ever. Please return Mr. Turner to his home, so he can continue to make the world a better place."

Beetleman brushed a tear from his eye as he returned to his seat. Next to him, Turner fidgeted, and the members of the audience coughed, a few whispering to their neighbors. Soares allowed Beetleman's statements to settle, then approached the midway point of the floor separating audience and jury. She took a deep breath and faced the audience.

"Technological advances are wonderful things. I'm grateful to live in a time of bullet trains, smart cars, and state-of-the-art medical care. It's a bit dizzying, however. I try to keep up with everything, but my ten-year-old nephew understands these things better than I do. According to my esteemed colleague, Nathanael Corzine can transform bad people into good. This may be the future, but I'm not sure it's the present. The one purpose of law that Mr. Beetleman did not address because it didn't suit his purpose, was deterrence. What happens to our society if every time someone commits a heinous crime, individuals such as Nathanael Corzine operate on them and turn them into—as he likes to say—a different person? Like magic, the evil person is gone, replaced by a good citizen. The fact is, we are all changed by the passage of years. But what about the crime? What is the repercussion if we don't punish Jason Turner? I'll tell you: anyone can do anything and not be

punished for it. We will become a nation of opportunists. And what if after we operate on a murderer and let him go free, he commits another murder? It wouldn't be the first time desperation, greed, or fear caused a supposedly good person to commit a serious crime. Do we do *another* operation, tell him to behave himself, and send him on his way? Do you want to live in that kind of society, where a sadistic thug can kill your son or daughter with impunity? I don't, and I'm sure the survivors of Tariq Lari's family don't either. Jason Turner said he wasn't thinking about tomorrow or the repercussions when he committed murder. He wasn't thinking about responsibility or fairness. He was thinking only of himself. It is the duty of the court to hold criminals responsible for their crimes. That's justice. Without it, our society breaks down and we lose *everything*. Together we can make sure that does not happen. Thank you."

After Soares sat down and the jury was dismissed for deliberations, the reserve of the audience broke down. Opinions about the case fell like shots in a paintball war. A portion of the audience favored the prosecution, seeing the defense's argument as more unwarranted leniency toward criminals. Others noted the humble, caring demeanor of Jason Turner and wondered how prison might change all that. After a few minutes, the audience settled into tapping on their phones.

Soares grabbed a coffee and called her divorce lawyer. Her husband and his attorney were still weighing Soares's offer. She wondered if a personality adjustment might have saved her marriage. If the doubts, the restlessness, the recriminations could be eliminated somehow, could those battered old feelings of love thrive again? Could she forgive his transgression? Could

she forgive the harsh words neither could ever take back? She didn't see how.

When the jury was unable to come to a decision on *The People v. Jason Turner* that day, the judge announced the proceedings would resume at nine the next morning.

* * *

As the courtroom filled up, a distraught Turner sat next to his attorney and asked, "Can I change my plea?"

Beetleman looked at his client as if he were insane. "To what?"

"Guilty. I shouldn't be allowed to get away with this."

"Jason, let the court decide. That's what it's for."

It wasn't in Turner's nature to argue.

After about ninety minutes, a message was sent to the judge. A verdict had been reached. As the jury filed in, its members seemed liberated, arms swinging, a few smiles. The foreman handed a piece of paper to the judge, who read it, then handed it back. He asked the foreman to read the verdict.

"In *The People versus Jason Turner*, we, the jury, find the defendant innocent of all charges."

Turner's body drooped, while Beetleman patted him on the shoulder. The lawyer then offered condolences to Soares. "Allow me to offer a last piece of evidence that didn't make it into the trial. This morning my client told me that he wanted to change his plea to guilty, that he shouldn't be allowed to get away with this. I convinced him to let the court decide. That's how innocent *he* is."

She shook her head, the toll of the case weighing on her face. "I think we're going to see more of this kind of defense. Congratulations for being on the cutting edge once again."

Dr. Corzine approached Jason Turner and shook his hand. “You can’t beat this kind of advertising. If any of your former friends need some changes, send them my way.”

Turner looked confused. “I don’t have contact with that kind of people anymore.”

Corzine smiled. “That’s okay. I have a feeling they’re going to have contact with me.” He noticed Soares’s glare and his smile vanished. He nodded and walked away.

As Corzine left the courthouse, a reporter asked him if the verdict was a financial windfall for Corzine and the field of personality adjustment. He looked at the camera and said, “Social justice is my sole reward.”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the jury came to the right decision? Why or why not?
2. The story discusses several reasons for punishment: deterrence, punishment, protection of the public, rehabilitation. What percentage would you put to each category under our current legal system of punishment? What do you think the percentages should be?
3. How is Jason Turner's story different than a criminal who, while in jail, found God and changed their ways? Should sincerely reformed criminals get the same leniency Turner received?
4. If personality adjustments were possible, do you agree with the government's limit of a ten percent change? What limit, if any, would you place on the program and what is the basis for your decision?
5. If you could go through a personality adjustment, would you do it? If you would do it, what would you change and why? Would you support a spouse or friend who said they wanted to go through the program?

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The Devil You Know

David Wiseman

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Content Disclosure: None

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I met the Devil today. He was walking down Main Street, right by the undertaker in B____, which is a little town near here, and which, for obvious reasons, I'd better not name. I recognized him straight away because he had furry legs with hooves for feet. Well, almost right away. At first, I thought he was just some guy in fancy dress, but who dresses up like that on Christmas Eve? Not only that, he clip-clopped as he walked, and who has an outfit with sound effects?

And he wasn't alone.

He had at least two smaller devils with him. I say at least because although I can picture them now, the edges of that picture are a little fuzzy, so yes, two for sure but maybe three. I took them for boys out with their dad doing last-minute shopping, looking for something for their mom, so two fits the picture I have in my mind. But who dresses their kids up in

fancy dress to match their dad?

I was so taken by the dad's legs—well, all the way from his chest down, the more I think about it—and the clip-clopping, that even now his face is hard to place, but I'm pretty sure he was wearing a hat, and when I picture that, I reckon it was a white cowboy hat and with some horns on it too. Horns like cattle might have with black tips, although I seem to recall by convention, they're supposed to be goat's horns. Besides the horns, the hat had a black band round it but wouldn't you expect the whole hat to be black? Maybe that old black-hat-white-hat thing isn't true after all. Either way, horns on a cowboy hat didn't make a lot of sense, even for a fancy-dress costume.

But then I haven't been to a fancy-dress party for a very long time, so I'm no expert.

The three of them, or four maybe, were coming right at me, the low winter sun straight in their eyes. There's not space for four abreast outside the undertaker's so I stepped off the path into the road to make room. Maybe they hadn't seen me at all, 'cos they just walked on till they were level with me and I just stood there gawping.

"Hey, fella, what's up?" said the dad, stopping and turning toward me.

What's up? Only everything. Where to start? So I mumbled, "Nothing." But I couldn't leave it, could I? "I just er… I wondered if…"

"Ah, surprised, eh?" He looked up and down the empty street before asking, "You're not from around here, right?"

"No, we just moved to…" I waved vaguely in the direction of my new home, about thirty minutes down the road.

"Ah, okay. Well," he said, ready to move on, "merry

Christmas to you."

"Wait," I blurted out, louder than I meant. "Who are you?"

He turned back to me. "Here I'm Nick, Nick Baphomet, other places I got other names, but I think you already know me."

"I'm not sure, maybe I do. You live here in B____? I wouldn't have thought in this sleepy little…"

"No, not full-time, just here for the holidays."

"You celebrate this holiday? I mean…" I hesitated over saying the word for fear of tempting a thunderbolt to strike me down, but he'd said it to me, hadn't he? "You celebrate Christmas?"

I looked again at the blotchy white and gray fur that started sparsely across his chest under his tweed jacket, thickening as it ran down his body to muscular legs tipped with shiny black hooves.

"Of course!" he replied. "One of my great successes don't you think?"

"Your great successes? But…"

"Oh yeah. Jesus, Mohamed, Abraham, all the other guys like that, all mine." He smiled and leaned toward me slightly, so a cloud of foul breath rolled over me. "To be honest, I'm still pretty smug about 'em all. Used to be that there were so many gods nobody knew who did what and who to pray to, then I got the idea of just one god. Counterintuitive, right? But then the argument's over whose god is the real god. So good, eh? Brought more misery into the world than anything before or since. Yep, proud of that."

My head was reeling. Was this guy just playing me for a fool?

"Am I dreaming this? Did I die without noticing?" I protested.

"Hey no, not so far as I can see, you look fine. But if you're feeling bad then you should…" He looked back at the funeral home then thought better of it. "Okay maybe not there, but across the road in the Salvation Army store, they'll let you sit in there a while."

"No, no, I'm fine. The people here, do they know you're here, staying for the holidays? Don't they…?"

Don't they what? Get up a bunch of vigilantes and throw him out of town? Call out a lynch mob? A lynch mob in B____ was even less likely than me standing on main street casually chatting with the Devil, which was what I was apparently doing.

"Folk round here know I like a bit of peace and quiet when I'm in town, and I try not to bother 'em. Mostly, if they see me coming, they cross the street to run that little errand they nearly forgot, making out they didn't see me. It's like that most places I go these days, people mind their own business and look the other way. I appreciate that."

"Where else do you go?" As I asked, I thought of Hell and added lamely, "Down… there?" and pointed a crooked finger to the ground.

"Whooo-hooo, down there," he said in a spooky voice, pointing with a shaky finger to mimic mine. "No! Down there's all closed up, has been for centuries. Got too crowded, and besides, there was *nothing down* there that couldn't be done right here."

"So where?"

"All over, a week here, another there. We've got offices worldwide, all the big cities and some fairly out-of-the-way

places too. There's opportunities everywhere."

"Offices? You have offices?"

"Incorporating was probably the single best thing I ever did. Meant I could delegate so much. Mostly it runs itself nowadays, I can put my feet up and do little more than watch, sometimes for decades. When I look back, I can't imagine what it'd be like running things in the old way. It'd be ridiculous; I'd never keep up. Gives me the shudders to think of it; there'd be a kinda creeping sickly goodness everywhere with only me pushing back at it."

"Let me get this right," I said slowly. "You've turned into some kind of jet-set corporate executive and you don't want my soul in exchange for my heart's desire?"

"Where've you been, friend!" He threw back his head and snorted a kind of cross between a laugh and a whinny. "Do you have any idea how much a single soul is worth today? Even a hardly used one like yours?"

I shook my head dumbly.

"Less than the cost of a cellphone. And a very cheap one, too, not one of your fancy things. Nobody deals in singles anymore. Everything's wholesale, bought and sold in bundles of two million here, ten million there."

His hooves clopped on the sidewalk, seemingly impatient to be done with me.

"The hat," I said shakily, anything to keep him talking. "A cow? And horse's hooves? I thought goat, did I get that wrong too?"

"We never liked that goat motif, and it was never my idea, but it kinda stuck for a while. But horse, goat, cow, elephant, it doesn't matter really. We're not strong on any of them. People

see what they want to see."

Behind him, there was an impatient skittering of small hooves. In my stupefied amazement, I'd quite forgotten his small companions until that moment.

He looked down at them and ushered them out from behind his legs. From each side of him, a small version of himself peered up at me. There may have been a third between his legs, but could be I'm just imagining that now.

"Yours?" My question was superfluous, but I asked it anyway.

"Hell, yes!" he announced proudly.

"How old?" I asked, just like he was a regular dad and his cow-horned horse-legged miniature clones were regular children.

"These guys?" He seemed startled by the question and stroked his chin while looking toward the sky. I noticed he had a wispy gingery mustache and a poor excuse for a beard, like he hadn't shaved for a week or so but nothing much had sprouted. But then, if he was taking a few days off for the holidays, why not? He interrupted my wandering thoughts with, "You know, I don't really remember, but they're sure growing fast these days. Maybe eight or nine hundred. I know there was some bloody crusade going on somewhere, but then again there've been quite a few of them over the years." To underline the humor he saw in this, he gave another snorting bray, which the little clones echoed with their own high-pitched whinny.

I stared at the clone peering around his right leg. He had black eyes set in a pale round face, reminding me of nothing so much as a currant bun ready for the oven.

"We should be getting along," the dad said in that polite

way that you do when you're getting bored with too long a conversation with a slight acquaintance.

"No, wait, you can't just walk away," I cried. "This is too…" I stopped. Too what? Too weird, too scary, too ridiculous? "Too important," I asserted, hoping flattery might delay him.

"Look, I have some things to pick up and these guys are getting restless. Do you want an autograph or something? I used to specialize in doing things for good folk like you. It's Christmas, so anything in particular you'd like? Oh, but no selfies, I don't do selfies."

"I just feel as though I should do something. Anything, but certainly something. What will people say? What will my wife say when I tell her? They'll think I'm crazy, but they'll think I should have done something. Made some kind of stand." It felt quite empowering to say that much and I was a little surprised at myself, asserting right over wrong like that, and with this guy of all guys.

"Oh, now I get it," he grinned. "You mean do something like challenge me to mortal combat, then, using some magical powers I guess, vanquish me and save the world. That kind of do something." He couldn't have been more scathing.

"Well no, obviously not, but don't you think I should at least try?"

As I spoke, I felt into the big right-hand pocket of my parka in case I had a forgotten hunting knife lurking in its depths. The best I could feel was the plastic cap from a long-lost ballpoint.

"Okay." He shrugged. "If you like, but let's get on with it. I thought we were getting along fine."

"We were," I reassured him. "I mean we are; it's been nice

to meet you and your… boys." They were staring up at me from their black-button eyes, their little black-hole mouths hanging open like I was a madman, the like of which they'd never seen before.

"So what you gonna do, stab me with those knitting needles?"

The knitting needles! The whole purpose of this errand had been to get knitting needles for my wife. They were protruding from the little paper bag I held in my left hand. But how to get them out, how to use them with enough force in a single strike and still retain any element of surprise? I stood staring at him, shopping in one hand, pen cap in the other.

"Maybe not the needles today, eh?" he said slowly, as one might speak to a toddler holding a box of matches. "So what now? I don't think you've thought this through very well. A fight, here on the street, in front of the children? What kind of example would that be? How long before someone calls the cops? Then you'll babble on about saving the world and in no time flat you'll be spending Christmas with the guys in white coats while your favorite chair will be sitting empty by your fireside."

Put like that, it seemed anything I could do was futile. I let go of the pen cap in my pocket.

"No, unless you really have got magic powers—and I'm pretty sure you haven't—then it's probably best to stand down your red alert. Here, let's shake and we'll be going."

Mesmerized, I took my hand from my pocket and proffered it limply toward him. He took it in cold, clammy fingers. It was like shaking hands with a dead squid.

"Well," I said a little lamely, trying to retain some vestige

of self-respect. “At least I didn’t sell my soul, I can say that. I didn’t do a deal with the…”

They’d moved a few clip-clops away from me, but he looked back. It was my turn to squint into the sun. “You didn’t do a deal?” he called back. “Oh, Robert, I think you already did. I’m pretty sure we’ve got a file on you somewhere. There’s a file on everybody somewhere.”

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—July 2021 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. If you, like the narrator in the story, met the devil, what would you do? What (*if any*) questions might you ask?
2. Traditionally, the devil is responsible for great evil. If, when you meet the devil, he is just going about his day as in the story, do you have any duties to fight or confront him? That is to say, do you need to confront an evil person, even when they aren't actively doing evil?
3. What do you think would have happened if the narrator had tried to fight the devil? What would have happened if he had successfully killed the devil?
4. Do those who do evil have the right to moments of peace and quiet when they are left alone, or should they always be confronted?
5. Do you think you have an obligation to always fight evil, at every turn, even if you are only equipped with metaphorical knitting needles?

* * *

Author Information

Present in Time

Cliff Aliperti is a Long Island-based writer, who has blogged about classic film for several years at his site *Immortal Ephemera*. "Present in Time" is Cliff's second story to appear in *After Dinner Conversation* following "Jerry's World" in the February 2023 issue. He has had other fiction published with *Fiction on the Web*, *JAKE*, and *Squawk Back*, among other places. You can find more about Cliff at *cliffaliperti.com*. X (Twitter) *@IEphemera*.

On Ice

Laura Mullen has been published as a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and was accepted to the *2024* Northern California Writer's Retreat. She sits on the board of the literary arts organization Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures, and is currently seeking representation for her debut novel, *Missing Eden*. She lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and three young children. Instagram *@lauramullenwrites*

Devil Do, Devil Don't

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Amazing Times at the Pub Agora

John Douglas Mullen is a philosopher living in Dresden, Maine. He has written books about Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy:*

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The Changed Man

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The Devil You Know

David Wiseman is an Anglo-Canadian writer who has enjoyed some success with his stories on both sides of the Atlantic. His novels appear under his more formal DJ Wiseman name, while his short stories have been published in a variety of journals. David enjoys reading both fiction and nonfiction, photography, genealogy, and in better times, travel, especially train travel. *djwiseman.co.uk;* Facebook @ *DJ Wiseman*.

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